

A KEN HOLT Mystery

THE SECRET OF HANGMAN'S INN

By BRUCE CAMPBELL



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By Bruce Campbell

The KEN HOLT Mystery Stories

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GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers*

NEW YORK

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CHAPTER I

WHERE IS JOE?

Ken Holt turned off the water and stuck his head between the parted shower curtains. “Hey!” he called, toward the open door of the adjoining bedroom. And when there was no answer he called again, louder this time. “Hey! Get up!”

“I’m coming,” a sleepy voice muttered. “I’m coming.”

A moment later Sandy Allen appeared in the doorway, his huge shoulders almost touching it on either side.

With his eyes still closed beneath his flaming mop of tousled hair, he unbuttoned his pajama jacket, dropped it on the floor, and then paused to yawn and stretch. The fists at the ends of his powerful upraised arms brushed lightly against the ceiling.

Ken was rubbing a big towel across his back. “Go ahead,” he said, stepping out of the shower stall. “It’s all yours.”

“Nice warm shower. Just what I need. Wake me up gently.” Eyes still closed, pajama trousers still on, Sandy stumbled past him into the tile-lined cubicle.

Ken grinned. His arm flashed through the curtains. His fingers found the cold-water faucet.

“Yow!” Sandy’s outraged yell filled the room.

Then the roar of water stopped and a dripping red head appeared. “You could have waited until I took my pajamas off, couldn’t you?” Sandy demanded.

An instant later a soggy ball of cloth struck Ken full in the face. He was still blinking his eyes when the water came on again and Sandy’s voice lifted in song, off key but noisily cheerful.

Ken grinned once more. “Serves me right,” he muttered. He wrung out the dripping pajamas, hung them over a towel rack, and dried himself off again.

Ten minutes later they both pounded down the stairs, skidding on the highly polished floor of the hall and barely coming to a stop just inside the sunlit kitchen.

Mom Allen looked up at them from the stove—at her tall redheaded son, and his slighter black-haired friend—and then she turned back to the bacon gently sizzling in the big frying pan.

“Do we pass inspection, Mom?” Ken asked.

She smiled. “You probably didn’t wash behind the ears, but I’ll let

you get away with it this morning. Fix the orange juice, Ken," she went on briskly. "And Sandy—you get the toast started."

"Yes, ma'am." The boys replied in unison.

Tiny Mom Allen was the undisputed boss of her household—of towering Pop Allen and his two equally big sons. She had been Ken's boss too, ever since he came to live with the Allens.

"Only fifty-eight inches of her all told," Pop had said musingly to Ken once. "But every inch of it solid inflexible steel."

"Oh, hush, Albert," Mom had said comfortably. "Get ready for supper. I made you a lemon pie today." And Pop, beaming at her, had obeyed.

Ken and Sandy obeyed her just as willingly now.

Sandy put bread into the toaster and glanced at the clock on the wall. "Pop and Bert gone already? It's not eight yet."

Mom turned the bacon slices over. "Bert's on his way to cover the opening of the state-wide medical conference in Beltsville. And Albert just couldn't wait to get at his typewriter." She smiled.

Ken smiled too. "Didn't he like what the zoning commission did at their meeting last night?"

Mom shook her head. "Not very well. The office probably is already blue with the smoke from his editorial." She lifted out the bacon and began to break eggs into the pan. "Three for you, Sandy?"

"Sure." Sandy buttered the first two pieces of toast.

A few minutes later the boys were ready to sit down. Ken reached toward the cupboard for cups. "Going to have some coffee with us, Mom?"

"No, thanks, Ken. I—"

The ringing of the phone drowned out her voice.

"I'll get it," Mom said. "You boys eat your breakfast while it's hot."

She was back while Ken was still pouring the steaming coffee.

"Your father wants you to run a little errand for him on the way to the office," she told Sandy. "Joe didn't turn up last night to clean the office, and Albert thought he might be sick. He wants you to go out to his house and see if he's all right."

Sandy swallowed a mouthful of food. "Never known him to be sick in all the years he's worked for us. Can't be anything serious."

"Maybe I ought to go with you," Mom said. "The poor man—living all alone like that, way out at the edge of town."

"Stop fretting, Mom. Joe Driscoll's taken good care of himself for about fifty years," Sandy told her, grinning. "I guess he can still manage, even if he does have a little cold or something."

"If he just had a phone you could call me when you got there, and if there was anything I could do—"

Sandy interrupted her again. "He doesn't have a phone for the

same reason that he lives way out at the edge of town—because he doesn't want to be bothered."

"We'll call you when we get back to the office, Mom," Ken spoke up, "and let you know how he is."

"Would you, Ken? That would be fine." Mom smiled at him. "And now if you boys have got everything you want, I'll get along to my housework." She started out of the room and paused at the door. "Remember, if there's anything at all I can do, you tell Joe I'll be right out. And then you come back here and get me."

"Aye, aye, sir." Sandy nodded with mock solemnity.

"I mean it now," his mother warned him.

A moment later they could hear her small feet tapping up the stairs.

"Pop isn't mixed up, is he?" Ken asked. "Doesn't Joe only come in four nights a week? Maybe last night wasn't one of the nights."

"It was. Been coming in Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays all the ten years he's worked for Pop—and never missed a one before. Always turns up on his bicycle at the dot of midnight."

"I know." Ken remembered the slight, gray-haired man arriving, punctually and quietly, on many of the evenings he himself had been working late at the *Advance* office. "He never says much."

"I know. He never does—except to Pop. Every once in a while Pop stays late and has a long talk with him. He's pretty fond of the little guy. I hope Joe isn't really sick—but I don't think anything like a cold would keep him off the job."

The seriousness of Sandy's voice, Ken noticed, contradicted the casual air he had shown when Mom was in the room. "Not that I'm surprised," Ken thought to himself. "The Allens—all of them—worry about people."

And he remembered—as he had remembered so often in the past—the way they had all come to his rescue when he was alone and helpless. That had been the time when Ken's father, Richard Holt, famous foreign correspondent, had been held prisoner by a ruthless gang. Only with the help of Pop Allen and his two sons, Bert and Sandy, had Ken managed to ferret out the headquarters of that gang and rescue his father.

Ken swallowed the last of his coffee and got up to carry his dishes to the sink.

Mom's voice floated down from upstairs. "Don't you boys bother with the dishes this morning. Get on out to Joe's."

Ken and Sandy exchanged a fleeting grin and once more obeyed orders. They let the kitchen door swing shut behind them and moved over the lawn toward the red convertible. It had been a gift to the boys at the conclusion of Richard Holt's rescue—the adventure the

newspapers had tagged *The Secret of Skeleton Island*.

But in Ken's opinion the best gift that adventure had brought—except for his father's safety—had been his own invitation to join the Allen family and, of course, the staff of the Allen—owned and Allen—operated Brentwood *Advance*. To Ken, motherless for years, and a newspaperman by instinct and inheritance, nothing could have been more welcome. He had never regretted accepting that invitation. He only hoped the Allens hadn't regretted offering it.

Sandy's voice broke into his thoughts. "What's the matter with you? You deaf, or something?"

"What did you say?"

"I asked you if you wanted to drive," Sandy repeated.

"No—you take it."

Sandy slid behind the wheel and waited for Ken to go around to the other side of the car. When Ken was on the seat beside him he started the engine, let it purr quietly for a moment, and then backed the car out of the driveway into the street.

"What are you moping about?" Sandy demanded. His voice suddenly sharpened. "There wasn't bad news in that letter from your father yesterday, was there?"

"Everything's fine with Dad," Ken assured him. "He'll be home next month he says."

"He says." Sandy shook his head. "That could mean any time from tomorrow until next year. What a life!"

"Whose?" Ken asked. "Dad's or mine?"

"Your father's. He travels all over the world ... excitement all the time ... adventure ... action ..."

Ken grinned. "I thought you said not long ago you'd had enough action for a while."

"Me?" Sandy protested. "I thrive on action!"

"You'd like to repeat that little adventure that Global News called *The Clue of the Coiled Cobra*?"

"Well, not right away," Sandy admitted.

Global News, the world—wide syndicate for which Richard Holt worked, had, as usual, bought not only Ken's story of the boys' recent adventure, but Sandy's expert news photographs as well. Nevertheless there had been aspects of that episode that Sandy still remembered with a shudder.

"I never did like snakes," he said emphatically now. "And recently I've liked them even less."

He eased through the traffic of Brentwood's business district and headed westward toward the outskirts of town. Before they had gone a mile the houses thinned out and empty fields lined the road. At the end of the second mile Sandy turned off the highway onto a dirt road

that seemed to lead to a stand of trees.

"If seclusion is what Joe likes," Ken remarked, "he's sure got it." He ducked instinctively as branches scraped the roof of the car.

Sandy finally stopped in a clearing surrounding a small house nestled in the grove.

"Starting his garden," he commented, pointing to a large patch of freshly dug earth beside the house.

They walked together up to the screened porch and knocked on the door. There was no sound from within.

Sandy pointed to Joe's bicycle, leaning against the wall inside the porch. "He can't be far away."

He knocked once more, still with no result, and looked questioningly at Ken.

Ken pushed against the screen door and it opened. With Sandy at his heels he went on inside to knock on the door leading into the house.

"Have you ever been here before?" he asked Sandy quietly.

"Not inside," Sandy said. "Drove him home once or twice in bad weather." Decisively he turned the knob and that door too opened. "Joe?" Sandy called. "You here?"

There was still silence.

"Evidently not," Ken said, after a moment. "Or else he's too sick to—Let's go in."

The blinds were pulled down, and it wasn't until they were inside that they could see anything. The house consisted of a single big room, with a cot in one alcove and an electric hot plate on a table in a corner. It was as neat and clean inside as it had been outside.

Before a brilliantly polished parlor stove stood a comfortable chair, and the low table beside it held a lamp, a pipe rack, and a large ash tray. One wall of the room was entirely covered by shelves sagging beneath the weight of closely arranged books.

But of Joe Driscoll himself there wasn't a sign.

Ken walked across the room and opened a door. Beyond it was a closet, in which hung an overcoat, a suit, and several odd pairs of trousers. On the floor stood a worn suitcase.

"If he'd gone away somewhere he'd have taken that, wouldn't he?" Ken asked casually, pointing to the suitcase. He realized that he was as relieved as Sandy was not to find Joe lying sick on his bed.

"You'd think so. But he's apparently gone *some* place." Sandy moved slowly toward the kitchen corner of the room. "Look at this," he said a moment later.

Ken joined him. "What?"

Sandy indicated the cup and saucer and egg—encrusted plate lying in the sink, together with silverware and a small coffeepot.

“Strange,” Ken agreed, glancing once more around the room. “He keeps everything else so neat—you wouldn’t expect him to leave dirty dishes lying around for more than two minutes.”

“What’s today?” Sandy asked abruptly.

“Tuesday. April fourth,” Ken told him. “Why?”

Sandy gestured toward a wall calendar—one given by the *Advance* to its advertisers each Christmas. The uppermost page was for Sunday, April second.

“Why didn’t he tear off Sunday’s and Monday’s pages if he was here?” Sandy asked.

“Maybe he forgot.”

“The way he forgot the dishes?” Sandy looked skeptical and slightly worried.

“Could he be visiting relatives or friends?” Ken suggested.

“He doesn’t have any relatives that I ever heard of,” Sandy said slowly. “And I’d say Pop’s the nearest thing to a close friend he’s got.”

He started resolutely toward the door. “Come on,” he said. “We’ve got to tell Pop about this. I don’t think he’ll like the looks of it, either.”

CHAPTER II

A CRYPTIC CLUE

It didn't take long to tell Pop what they had learned at Joe Driscoll's little house. There was so little to tell.

Pop heard them out in silence, his pipe throwing a smoke screen around his desk, his big fingers tapping idly at the space bar of his typewriter.

"It beats me," he said when Sandy had finished.

"Don't you have any idea of where he might have gone for a couple of days?" Sandy asked. "Hasn't he ever said anything that might suggest ... ?" His voice ran down as he saw Pop shaking his head.

"The truth is I don't know any more about Joe than you do," Pop said slowly. "Sure—I've talked to him for hours. But it's always about Shakespeare." He grinned wryly. "Joe's the only person in this town who can talk about him longer at one sitting than I can. I know what Joe thinks about King *Lear* and *As You Like It*—but that's about the size of it. He never seemed to invite questions, so I never asked any."

"But when you first hired him," Ken said, "didn't he say anything about where he came from or where he'd been working?"

Pop took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at it. "I was just thinking about that day. Joe kind of turned up out of nowhere. Didn't offer any references. Just said he wanted to go to work. I liked the look of him, and I happened to need somebody just then—and that's all there was to it. He's been a good friend and a good worker ever since." He banged the pipe against his wastebasket. "But I suppose there's no law says a man can't walk off a job as suddenly as he walked into it. Maybe he decided he's just been here long enough."

"But the way he left things—" Sandy began.

Ken interrupted him. "Does Joe own that house?"

Pop glanced up at him. "I don't know. I never thought about it. I'd say not. He doesn't have the marks of a property owner, somehow. But—" He broke off and reached for the phone.

"He doesn't earn enough to buy a house—even that little one," Sandy said.

"He said he earned all he wanted." Pop was speaking past the telephone. "I offered him a full week's work, but Joe said he'd rather not—gave me the impression he has a small pension." Just then he got his connection, and he asked brisk questions of the county clerk. "Sure I'll wait," he concluded, cradling the phone against his shoulder.

"You're sure, Clem?" Pop said a moment later. "O.K. Thanks." He

dropped the instrument back into its cradle before he spoke. "You were right, Ken. He does own that house—and there's no mortgage on it, either."

"Then he hasn't just walked off the job *and* walked out of town," Sandy concluded.

"But wherever he's gone, he was walking," Ken pointed out. "Remember his bicycle was still there."

Pop sat suddenly erect. "Did you take a really good look around? If he'd walked a little way from the house—just for a breath of air maybe—and fell down and broken his leg or something—"

"No, we didn't," Ken said quietly. "We should have."

Sandy was three strides toward the door. "Has he got a bad heart, Pop?"

"Not that I know of. But get on back out there fast. And call me from the nearest gas station if—"

"We will," Ken assured him, and ran to catch up with Sandy.

The redhead had the convertible's motor running before Ken slid into the seat, and it was only a few minutes later when they pulled up again beside the little house.

It looked just as it had half an hour before—the bicycle still visible through the screen, the blinds still neatly drawn as they had left them.

"Joe!" Sandy shouted loudly, as he got out of the car. "Joe!" He turned to send his voice in another direction.

Only a faint echo answered him, and a rustling of new—leafed branches.

Sandy tried once more, and they waited another minute.

"Let's look for a path," Ken said then. "One Joe might have followed if he'd just gone for a little walk."

They moved around the house, eyes alert. And at the rear they found a well—defined trail leading off between the trees.

Sandy shouted as they went along it.

But again there was no answer. And the path ended abruptly in a garbage pit only a few hundred feet from the house.

When they had circled it carefully they stood irresolute a moment at the foot of the path.

"There's only a couple of acres of this woodland," Sandy said finally. "Let's take a look around."

Half an hour later they emerged again into the clearing around the house. Sandy was a little hoarse from persistent shouting, but their search had produced no other result.

"Let's take another look around inside," Ken suggested. "There might be something we missed."

"Right." Sandy followed Ken toward the front porch.

They went through the screen door and Ken reached for the knob

of the inner door, not bothering to knock this time.

The knob turned in his fingers, but the door didn't budge.

"Stuck?" Sandy asked. "It opened easily before."

"It's not stuck." Ken rattled the door to show that it was loose in its frame. "It's locked."

"But that's—!" Sandy tried the door himself. "You're right," he said slowly. Then he grinned. "Joe's come back! Hey, Joe!" He pounded heavily on the wood.

There was no reply. Sandy looked puzzled for a moment. "Guess he must have just stopped in for a minute. Maybe he went right on down to the *Advance*, to—"

Ken pointed to the bicycle still leaning against the wall.

Sandy's face fell. "He could have caught a ride, I suppose, but—" He squared his shoulders suddenly. "I don't like the looks of this. I'm going inside."

He walked half the length of the porch, tried a window, and it slid up smoothly under his hand. Sandy stepped over the low sill into the room. Ken went through after him.

"Joe?" Sandy called tentatively. Then his finger stretched out toward the sink. "Look!"

The dirty dishes were gone. The sink was clean and empty. Ken reached for the dish towel hanging on its hook, and then handed it silently to Sandy. It was damp.

While Sandy was still rubbing the cloth blankly between his fingers, Ken opened the closet door.

The clothes on the hangers looked just as they had looked earlier. But the battered suitcase was missing.

Ken stood in the center of the room, turning slowly around. The chair, the table, were as they had been. The cot in its corner—Ken moved toward it.

"Was the cover mussed up like that before?" Sandy asked.

Ken pulled the cover back. Beneath it was a neatly tucked—in sheet. "No blankets," Ken said. He swung toward the bookshelves. "And some books are missing. Look—there were no gaps in the rows before."

"Why would Joe go off some place with books and blankets?" Sandy muttered. "If he were camping out—"

"But why would he make such a secret of it?" Ken broke in. "And why did he suddenly come back, wash his dishes, pick up some stuff, and start out all over again? Unless," he added slowly, "it wasn't Joe who came in here during the last hour ..."

"Let's get out of here," Sandy said abruptly. "If Joe did come back, Pop may have heard from him by now."

"And if it wasn't Joe who came here?"

Sandy paused for a second with one foot over the window sill. "Then it's a job for Andy and his Brentwood police force."

Half an hour later Chief of Police Andy Kane was shaking his head slowly at Pop and the boys.

"Sure," he said heavily, "you can file a missing persons report on Joe Driscoll if you want to, and I'll send it out on the wires. But take my advice—hold off for another day or so."

"Why?" Pop demanded.

Andy shrugged. "People do funny things. For all we know, Joe'll turn up at work tonight."

"But why didn't he turn up last night?" Pop wanted to know. "He's never missed before in ten years."

"And who cleaned up the dishes?" Sandy asked. "Joe?"

Andy shrugged again. "Why not? He went off for a little—he came back—he went off again. Give it another day," he urged, leaning forward. "People don't like to be reported missing. And I can't say as I blame 'em. How'd you like it yourself if a policeman came up and grabbed you just because you'd decided to take a day off? Joe's not a kid playing truant from school, you know. He's a grown man—and pretty independent, I'd say, from what I've seen of him."

Pop suddenly nodded. "I guess you're right, Andy. Joe is independent. And I wouldn't want him to think we were trying to hound him. Man's entitled to a day off once in ten years, I guess."

"But, Pop—" Ken began.

"You just listen to Pop and me," Andy urged, breaking in. "Mind you, now, if he doesn't show up tomorrow—if there's no sign of him around his house, and you haven't heard anything—you bring me in a picture of Joe and I'll start the wheels moving. But give him a chance to clear this thing up himself."

Ken and Sandy exchanged glances.

"Well," Sandy said reluctantly, "I suppose one more day won't hurt. But I'll look up a picture as soon as we get back to the office."

"That's the ticket." Andy beamed at him. "You do that. Have it ready—just in case."

Pop went silently back to his desk when they all returned to the *Advance* office, and Ken and Sandy made for the basement darkroom where Sandy maintained his personal files and developed and printed his pictures.

Sandy went rapidly through a drawer and handed Ken a small print. "Took it at the *Advance* picnic last summer."

It wasn't one of Sandy's best pictures, but it had caught the twinkle behind Joe's rimless glasses. It had caught something else too. Joe was standing beside Bert Allen, but even Bert's size couldn't diminish the gray-haired little man's air of quiet dignity.

Ken felt a curious tightening in his chest. If anything serious had happened to Joe—

He returned the print. And suddenly he snapped his fingers. “Maybe there’s some clue in his locker.”

“Good idea!”

The narrow metal door was unlocked—no one ever bothered to lock doors at the *Advance*—and hanging inside were Joe’s denim work trousers and a work shirt. On the floor, neatly side by side, stood an old pair of shoes.

Ken studied the meager array for a moment, and then took the shirt off its hook and felt in its pockets. When he withdrew his hand from the second one it held a folded sheet of paper.

Ken hesitated only a moment before he opened it. Joe surely wouldn’t object under the circumstances.

Together the boys read the few scrawled words:

Joe: Keep a sharp eye out for the Black One. I saw him this morning.

It was signed with the single letter L. “Black One,” Sandy repeated. The words had a mysterious and ominous note as he pronounced them. “What does that mean?”

“No return address. No clue but that letter ‘L.’” Ken dug his hand into the pocket again, brought it out empty, and then tried the pockets of the trousers. “No envelope,” he reported. “If we could find the envelope around his house—”

“Come on.” Sandy straightened. “And we’ll show this to Pop too. Maybe then he’ll give Andy a push, and we can begin to get somewhere.”

They tore upstairs and into the front office just in time to hear Pop call out their names. He was standing at his desk with something in his hand, and his face was grim. His voice was grim too.

“Got a card from Joe,” he said.

“What does it say?” Sandy demanded, his face lighting—

“Where’s it from?” Ken wanted to know.

Pop handed it to them, address side up. It had been postmarked in Crandon the day before.

“Crandon,” Ken said. “That’s not far from here, is it?”

Sandy took it from him impatiently and turned it over. “ ‘Dear Pop,’ ” he read aloud. “ ‘Sorry I had to leave so suddenly, but I got word that my brother was ill. I should be back early next week. Hope this doesn’t inconvenience you too badly.’ ” He broke off to grin. “ ‘Swell! He’s all right then. Too bad about his brother, but—And this explains why Joe came back to get those blankets and books. A sick person—’ ”

Pop had been trying to interrupt Sandy, and now he succeeded. “Read the rest of it,” he demanded.

Ten minutes later, in Andy Kane's office, the police chief read part way through the message and then he too looked up, smiling, as Sandy had. "See?" he said. "What did I tell you? He's—"

This time it was Sandy, paler than usual, who interrupted with his father's own words. "Read the rest of it."

Andy Kane's rumbling voice took up the message where he had broken it off. " 'Hope this doesn't inconvenience you too badly. Especially sorry I had to take off before I got around to the special job I meant to do Monday night—pie all the type. Best regards, Joe Driscoll.' "

Andy Kane looked up. "Well?" he asked.

"Well nothing!" Pop exploded. "It's absolutely crazy—and there's something mighty wrong somewhere. Nobody sets out to pie type. Don't you know that? To pie type means to mix it up—to scramble it all around. It only happens when somebody drops a case—when there's an accident."

"But—?"

"Joe's been around a newspaper office long enough to know that, Andy," Ken said. "We think he wrote that deliberately, to tell us something was wrong—because for some reason he wasn't able to let us know what the real trouble was."

CHAPTER HI

THE POSTMASTER'S STORY

"Now look here," Kane said mildly, settling back in his chair. "What are you all taking this so seriously for? Joe makes a little joke—says he didn't get to pie the type—and you—"

"It's not a joke!" Sandy burst in. "What's funny about it?"

"Well, you said it was a thing a person would only do by accident. He's pretending here he was going to do it deliberately." Kane's voice was patient and assured, "Maybe you don't think it's funny, but apparently he did."

"Nobody around a newspaper office thinks it's funny," Pop Allen growled.

"Joe Driscoll doesn't make stupid jokes, Andy," Ken said. "He's a student of Shakespeare. He makes jokes by twisting Shakespearian quotations around—he doesn't say a silly thing like that and expect people to think it's funny."

Kane sighed. "All right. So it isn't funny. But why do you harp on that when the rest of the message makes perfectly good sense? Fact is, his brother may be real sick—Joe might be so worried he didn't know quite what he was writing in that last sentence. But everything else's all right. Have you tried the Crandon phone book? Maybe you can call up his brother's house and get it all straightened out."

Three grim faces looked steadily back at him.

"In all the ten years I've known Joe I've never heard him so much as mention a family," Pop said. "I don't believe he's got a brother."

Kane gestured, as if to brush away an annoying fly. "Now, Pop, you said yourself you don't know much about the man. For all you know, he's got a wife and a dozen children some place."

"Joe?" Sandy sounded incredulous.

Kane ignored him, and addressed himself exclusively to Pop. "Maybe this whole message is a blind—he just wrote anything that popped into his head, to keep you from worrying. If the man's got some kind of family trouble—folks he ran off from, maybe, ten years ago—they might have caught up with him again, and Joe just beat it. In that case he wouldn't want you to know the truth about where he was—he wouldn't want anyone to know."

Pop shook his head dazedly. "Look, Andy," he said, "I see what you're driving at. And in some cases it might fit. I know all about the statistics on missing persons—that most of them are missing because they *want* to be, and they don't thank other people for running after them. But Joe's not like that. He doesn't owe any money. He's reliable

—and considerate. He wouldn't have run off from his family and left them to track him down. And he wouldn't run off and leave us to worry, either."

"Lots of fine upstanding citizens just up and take French leave once in a while," Kane said firmly. "But let's check one thing while we're at it."

He reached under a shelf, picked up several books and put them down again, and finally brought up the phone book for the adjoining county where the town of Crandon was located.

"Driscoll," Kane said, thumbing through the pages. "Maybe we can clear this whole thing up in—Hmm. No Driscoll listed."

"See?" Sandy said loudly. "We told you!"

"Lots of people don't have phones," Kane reminded him. "Now why don't you two boys run over to Crandon and inquire around? I'd send a man out to do the job if I thought it was worth—I mean, if I didn't think you could do it just as well. Kind of shorthanded around here, anyway, you know."

"Let's do that," Ken said quickly. "Right away, Sandy. And while we're at it we'll stop at the bus station here and see if Joe bought a ticket to Crandon—or any place else—in the last couple of days."

"Sure." Sandy started for the door.

"Now let me know if you find anything startling," Kane told them cheerfully. "But I'm willing to bet you won't."

"I'm willing to bet Joe isn't running away from anything," Pop said stubbornly. "But we'll let you know, Andy, in any case."

"It isn't that I don't want to help, Pop."

"I know, Andy. I know. You've got your routine, same's we have at the *Advance*: check your facts before you write the headline." Pop grinned wryly. "Come on, boys."

When they were outside and in the car, Ken said, "I want to show you what we found in Joe's shirt pocket, Pop."

Sandy, behind the wheel, looked startled. "I almost forgot about that. We should have shown it to Andy too."

"He'd probably consider it a definite proof of something shady in Joe's past," Ken said, handing the folded sheet of paper to Pop.

The editor of the *Advance* scanned the few words, grunted, and then read them again. "Makes no sense to me."

"Ditto for us," Sandy said, maneuvering around a truck. "Ken thought the envelope it came in might still be in Joe's house though. We'll take a look on our way to Crandon." He braked to a stop in front of the office. "This where you want to be dropped, Pop?"

"Thanks." Pop eased himself out of the car, closed the door, and leaned on it. "There's a good chance that Andy's right, you know—that Joe's off on some business of his own that we've got no right to

pry into. But then again maybe Andy's wrong and there's more to all this than meets the eye. If that's the case"—he ran a hand through his mop of graying red hair—"keep your eyes open and your necks pulled in."

"We will, Pop," Ken said quietly. "Any leads we get, we'll bring straight to you. Oh—by the way—will you call Mom and tell her what's up? I promised we'd let her know whether Joe was sick or not."

Pop's hand ruffled his hair again. "Sure. I'll call her. Kind of hate to let her know—Well, never mind. I'll take care of it. Good luck." He turned away from the car and Sandy released the brake.

It took only a few moments to check the bus station—with negative results. The ticket seller was positive that Joe hadn't recently purchased a ticket for any of the four bus lines using the Brentwood terminal.

"I know the old boy," he said, "but I haven't seen him for weeks. Of course he might have bought a ticket after he got on a bus. The office here closes at five. Hope nothing's wrong," he added.

Ken mumbled something vaguely reassuring. "No luck," he said, back at the car. "Let's try the house."

Twenty minutes later, as Sandy was pulling off the highway into the lane leading to Joe's, Ken stopped him. "Maybe we can learn something from the driveway."

Sandy shut off the engine, shrugging. "Too late for that, I'd say. We've driven through here twice ourselves. Any clues that might have been around—"

"I know," Ken agreed. "But it's worth a check."

They got out of the car and Sandy bent low over the dirt lane. "These are our tracks." He pointed to clearly defined marks. "Our new tires show up fine."

Ken nodded, and looked a few feet further along. "That one's not ours."

Sandy knelt down to study the spot Ken indicated. "Right. It's a diamond tread—ours is rectangular. And it's much bigger than ours too." He moved on a few feet, a new excitement in his voice. "Something went up the lane before we did."

"Before which of our trips? First or second?"

Sandy covered a dozen feet, eyes elued to the ground, before he answered. "*Between* our two trips," he said finally, triumphantly. "Look here." Ken joined him. "The big track is over ours at this point. But back there it was under ours. That means it was here after our first trip, but before our second!"

"In other words," Ken said thoughtfully, "the car that made this track was carrying the person—Joe or somebody else—who cleaned

up the dishes, took the bag and the books and the blankets, and locked the door."

Sandy nodded. "That's what it looks like."

"O.K. Let's drive on up to the house. But try to keep off to one side of the lane."

A moment later, when they left the car near the house, Sandy pointed to more tracks in the clearing.

"They pulled right up to the door," he pointed out. "Then they swung around in the clearing and went back."

Ken nodded. "And now if we can find that envelope—"

Once they were inside Ken headed straight for a wastebasket he had noticed near the sink. He was certain it had been empty, but he wanted to make sure. It was.

"If Joe hadn't been quite so neat," he muttered, "and emptied his wastebasket every day—Wait a minute. What do you suppose he did with the papers and stuff *in* it?"

"Garbage heap?" Sandy suggested.

Ken concentrated. "Don't remember seeing any papers there. Probably because he burned them as soon as he took them out." Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "It's been pretty warm the past week. If he—" He moved quickly to the shining black stove and pulled open the door. "Come on," he said, grinning. "This is full of papers."

Together they pulled out and spread on the floor the discarded items—a crumpled grocery bag, several ads torn neatly through, a wadded bread wrapping, and four wrinkled envelopes. Quickly they set aside everything but one of the envelopes—the only one not bearing the imprint of the companies which had issued the torn ads.

"This is about the right size for that folded piece of paper," Ken said. He turned it over and smoothed it flat.

Joe's name and address were clear and legible. But the upper left—hand corner of the envelope, with the return address, had been partly torn away. The last line—the name of the sender's town—was clear: Colfax. But of the sender's name and address only a few letters remained—apparently the last letters in each case.

"Our luck's against us," Ken muttered. "It came from somebody whose name ends in A—I—N. And below that there's nothing but the letter Y, and then BLDG."

"Well, that's something," Sandy said. "Of course there are about twenty—five thousand people in Colfax." He ignored Ken's groan. "But there probably aren't many office buildings whose name ends in Y."

Ken put the envelope into his pocket. "There could be more than a dozen," he pointed out. "Still, with that and the A—I—N at the end of his name ..." He sighed. "Anyway, our first job is to go to Crandon.

Come on.”

Crandon was only a speck on their road map—a village listed as having a population of about 250. It was on the main east—west highway some twenty—two miles from Brentwood.

Sandy pulled off the road in front of its combination gas station, grocery, feed and hardware store. Only half a dozen houses were in sight.

“Looks like the population’s nearer zero than two hundred and fifty,” Sandy remarked. “If Joe’s around here some place, it ought to be easy to spot him.”

“The post office ought to be a good place to check,” Ken suggested. “Wonder where it is.”

“Right in front of you, mastermind. With the rest of the Crandon business center.” Sandy indicated weathered lettering on the door of the building before them —lettering proclaiming that it was, along with everything else, the United States Post Office of Crandon.

They left the car, pushed open the door of the store, and went inside. At the far end of the one big room, between piles of assorted merchandise, they saw a barred window and several rows of glass—fronted mailboxes.

“Yes, sir? Anything I can do for you?” The owner of the voice behind the window was so short that his bald head barely topped the shelf.

“We’re looking for a friend of ours—Joe Driscoll,” Ken said. “He’s supposed to be staying with a brother here.”

“Driscoll?” Round eyes squinted thoughtfully. “Been the postmaster here nigh onto forty years but never heard of any Driscoll’s hereabouts. In Crandon, you say?”

“Or perhaps on a farm near here,” Ken suggested.

The postmaster shook his head. “Nope. Got four rural delivery routes out of this office—but nary a Driscoll on any of ‘em. I’m sure of that.”

Ken handed him the post card. “He mailed this here.”

“Yep.” The bald head nodded. “No doubt of that. That’s my cancellation mark—got a crack in the corner.”

“I don’t suppose you’d remember canceling that card,” Sandy said hopefully.

Ken thrust Joe’s picture through the window. “This help? Driscoll’s the small man, on the right.”

“Shucks!” the postmaster complained. “Now you got me mixed up. I was just going to say I *did* remember canceling this card—but I don’t recognize that picture at all.”

“What do you mean?” Ken’s voice had tensed.

The postmaster pointed a stubby finger at the cancellation. “See

that? I recollect this card because it was brought in here just as I was locking the bag of east—bound mail.” He looked up. “Eastbound mail goes out on the 3:12 train. I lock the bag at 3:00 sharp. Gives me twelve minutes to get it down to the depot.”

“And you remember—?” Sandy prodded.

“What I’m saying. I had the lock in the bag when a man comes in with this card. Like to give folks a break, so I stopped to put it in. But I was in such a hurry that I missed with the stamp and had to do it twice.” He handed the card back. “You can see I didn’t hit the stamp fair and square the first time. After forty years you’d think my aim would be perfect, wouldn’t you?” He chuckled.

“And the man who mailed it—you say this isn’t a picture of him?” Ken asked.

The postmaster shook his head. “It is not. It’s coming clearer now. Fellow who gave me this card was big.” He tilted his head and looked up at Sandy. ” ‘Bout your size, I’d say.”

“You’re sure?” Sandy asked.

“Was he dark or fair?” Ken asked. “Young? Old?”

“Don’t remember anything else,” the postmaster said flatly. “Big—that’s all I do recall. Never saw the man in your picture there. But I do remember that card, all right.” He shook his head soberly. “Just made the mail sack, it did. Another minute and it wouldn’t have left Crandon until the next day. Little thing like a minute can be mighty important, can’t it?”

“That’s right,” Ken agreed soberly. “Little things can be mighty important.”

CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK ONE

“Let’s add up some of the little things’ that seem important to us,” Ken said, breaking the lengthy silence that had lasted since they got back into the car. “We’ll divide them into *for* and *against*.”

“For and against what?” Sandy drummed on the wheel.

“For and against there being something fishy here.” Ken pulled paper and pencil out of his pocket.

“The first *for*,” Sandy suggested, “is that it’s not like Joe to have gone off without a word to Pop.”

“Check.” Ken made a note. “Two: the reference to pied type might have been meant as a kind of signal.”

“Three: the mysterious visit back to Joe’s house this morning—by Joe or somebody.”

Ken’s pencil flew. “Four: the tire tracks at his place —and Joe doesn’t own a car.”

“Five: Joe wrote that post card, but somebody else mailed it.” Sandy thought a moment. “Six: why are there no Driscolls around here?”

“Well, I guess that’s it,” Ken said. “Six points in favor of the situation being definitely fishy. Now let’s see how many of those can be canceled out by some reasonable explanation? Let’s have the *against*s.”

“Andy would say Joe went off without leaving word because of something in his past—criminal or otherwise —that made him want to vanish fast.”

Ken made a note. “So we’ll put that down—whether it makes sense to us or not. Two: if Joe really has a brother, and dashed off to him when he heard he was sick, he might not have had time to leave word. And when he came back for the blankets and stuff, he still didn’t have time.”

“He’d *make* the time,” Sandy insisted.

“Never mind. It’s still a possibility.”

“But Joe doesn’t own a car.”

“Could have been his brother’s,” Ken pointed out.

“And the post card which Joe didn’t mail?”

“A friend or a neighbor mailed it for him—somebody who happened to be driving through Crandon, since the Driscoll family apparently doesn’t live near here.” Ken looked up. “For that matter, the ‘brother’ might be a stepbrother—in which case his name might not be Driscoll.”

"All right." Sandy sighed. "So all we've done is knock down all the *fors*—except the pied type."

"And—"

"I know. Andy thinks that's a joke—or that Joe was so upset he didn't know what he was writing. I won't accept either of those reasons."

"I won't accept them, either," Ken said thoughtfully. "I don't think Joe makes jokes like that—and I don't think he loses his head. If he was trying to let us know that he was—well, being held somewhere against his will, maybe ..."

"What are you trying to say?" Sandy demanded.

"I don't know myself." Ken's voice was brusque. "And there's the mysterious note from Colfax, too, about the 'Black One.'"

Sandy jammed in the ignition key and turned it on. "That's something we can check on—right now. This 'held against his will' stuff sounds melodramatic to me, but I don't like it just the same."

Colfax was south of Brentwood. Sandy swung the car back the way they had come, and turned right at the next junction.

"We'd better call Pop and let him know where we are," Ken said after a while. And to forestall Sandy's next suggestion, he added, "If we call from a diner, we can grab a bite to eat at the same time."

Fifteen minutes later, in a roadside diner, Ken found two huge sandwiches and a glass of milk waiting for him at the counter when he returned from the phone booth. He took a bite before he began to report.

"Pop thinks we're right to check on the Colfax business," he began, when he had swallowed the mouthful. "There's nothing new at his end. And," he added, "we've got an assignment in Colfax, while we're at it."

"Assignment?"

"That traveling art show," Ken told him. "Remember? The *Advance* has been carrying releases about it. It's in Colfax now, and that's as close as it comes to Brentwood. So Pop wants a story."

Sandy was wrinkling his brows in concentration. Suddenly he nodded. "The show the Manhattan Museum sends out?"

"Right," Ken told him. "Shouldn't take us long. Their publicity's been good—they'll probably have releases we can pick up. And a few pictures, Pop says. I told him the camera was in the car."

When they entered the outskirts of Colfax, Sandy spoke again. "Let's clean up the art show first. That building we're looking for—with a name that ends in Y—might take awhile to find. Maybe it's not even a business building. It could be an apartment house."

"Could be," Ken agreed.

"Where's the show?"

“Library,” Ken told him.

Colfax was a busy town, but they had little difficulty parking near the library. Sandy hauled his camera bag out of the back seat, attached the flash to his press camera, stuffed some bulbs in his pocket, and picked up some film holders. “Let’s get it over with,” he muttered.

The entire main room of the library had been given over to the exhibit—some twenty—five paintings, including several famous old masters. They were arranged in groups: Italian paintings on one wall, Dutch and Flemish on another, English on a third, and French on the fourth. The whole room glowed with rich color and vibrant life.

The guard at the door stepped forward, eyeing Sandy’s camera. “Sorry. We don’t permit photographs.”

Ken showed his press card. “Is Mr. Franklin here?”

“The press representative?” The guard’s face cleared. “First door on your right.” He pointed down a corridor.

A moment later the boys looked through the open doorway into a small room. At the single desk, a phone to his ear, a harassed young man was trying to scribble on a small scrap of paper that kept sliding away from his pencil.

Ken stepped forward and held the paper steady.

The young man looked up and winked his thanks. “Sure,” he said into the phone. “Right ... I’ll let you know.” He set the phone down and leaned back, mopping his wrinkled brow with a handkerchief.

“Thanks,” he said, smiling, “for the extra hand. All press representatives ought to be equipped with at least three. And maybe two heads.” He tucked the handkerchief back into his breast pocket. “Now. I’m Franklin. What can I do for you?”

Ken introduced himself and Sandy and explained their errand. Franklin nodded briskly, signed his name to a picture—taking permit for Sandy, and handed Ken half a dozen releases from the several piles on his desk.

“Not trying to get rid of you,” he said then, standing up. “But the Colfax Woman’s Club arrives in force this afternoon, so I’ve got my hands full. And we move to Beltsville day after tomorrow—which means I’ve got to get over there sometime this afternoon to check up. Moving a couple of million dollars’ worth of paintings around the country is no small job.”

“All right to photograph the crowd?” Sandy asked.

“The Woman’s Club will probably love it—but I’ll check to make sure. That last release,” Franklin told Ken, “is an account of—” He stopped suddenly and they followed his glance to the doorway. “Mr. De Lacey!”

The portly well—dressed man on the threshold smiled pleasantly.

"Just stopped in to say hello. I'm in town on a buying trip and couldn't resist the chance to look at my favorite Rembrandt. Don't let me interrupt you, though."

The boys started for the door. "We were just leaving," Ken assured him.

Franklin's voice called them back. "This ought to be worth at least a line in the *Brentwood Advance*, boys. 'Harmon De Lacey, member of the board of trustees of the Manhattan Museum, well-known antique dealer, art collector, and critic, declares that the Rembrandt now on exhibit in the ...' You know the sort of thing." Franklin grinned. "Mr. De Lacey, give a pretty statement to the press here—to Holt and Allen of the *Advance*."

"Oh, no, you don't," De Lacey said firmly, smiling at the boys. "I may be on the prowl for heirlooms in Brentwood any day now—I don't want a ready-made reputation there." His eyes twinkled. "Always sends the price up, when people think they're selling their great-grandmother's chair to an expert. Just pretend you never met me, boys."

Franklin groaned in mock despair. "How can I get out lively publicity when—Oh—oh! Here come the ladies. Make yourselves at home, all of you." He straightened his tie and moved toward the fluttering crowd at the entrance.

De Lacey fell into step with the boys as they started toward the exhibit rooms. "There's really some wonderful stuff here," he said pleasantly. "If I could answer any questions about it, I'd be glad to. But"—he glanced toward the sheaf of papers in Ken's hand—"Franklin knows his job. I expect you've got everything there you need."

"Thanks," Ken said. "If I were going to try to write anything much about the pictures themselves, I'd need plenty of help."

"If you're going to publish photographs of the paintings, you won't need words," De Lacey said earnestly. "People think they have to *know* about art. But all they have to do is look at it—and enjoy it. Even in black—and—white reproductions—But I'm keeping you. And I have only a moment myself for a look at my favorite."

He turned away, with a small bow, and then turned back again with a card in his hand. "If you really enjoy looking at pictures, do stop in at my gallery sometime when you're in New York. I usually have one or two things on hand that are worth a visit."

Ken took the card and put it in his pocket. "Thank you," he said, and was relieved when this time De Lacey moved steadily away. He did take note of the "favorite Rembrandt" that the art critic headed for—he meant to take special note of it himself—but he knew that Sandy and he could finish their assignment more rapidly if they were unaccompanied.

“Let’s go,” Sandy muttered. “With any luck I’ll be through in five minutes.”

Ken knew most of the pictures in the exhibit. He and his father had seen them often in New York at the Manhattan Museum. But he resolutely drove himself through the crowd, noting the number of spectators, and pulling his eyes away from the walls when they had been drawn there by some vivid splash of color or some particularly glowing figure. Sandy, he thought, might really be finished in the five minutes he had mentioned. Sandy always said he “couldn’t see anything in art,” and wouldn’t be tempted to pause here and there.

But when Ken had enough notes for his news story—including an enthusiastic statement from the Woman’s Club president—he found Sandy standing fixedly before a small portrait, his camera hanging limply in his hand.

When he heard Ken’s voice he looked around and blinked. “Finished?” he echoed blankly. “Oh—no, not quite.” He lifted the camera hurriedly and focused it.

“This isn’t supposed to be one of the most famous ones,” he mumbled, behind the black box, “but I want to make a print for myself.” He clicked the shutter. “You keep thinking the old man is going to speak—don’t you?” he asked, studying the painting a moment longer before he turned away. “Wish I could take home the original instead.”

Ken grinned. “Thought you always said a good photograph was better than a painting any day.”

“All right,” Sandy said aggressively. “So I always said it. So I’m not saying it any more.” He turned for a last look at the picture. “You know,” he said quietly, “the old man’s eyes look a little like Joe’s. Don’t they?” He spun toward the door. “Let’s go find that building with a name that ends in Y.”

They decided to try business buildings first—to park in the center of town and make their search on foot.

“A phone book or a directory is not much good when all we know is the *last* letters of a man’s name—and the last letter of the name of a building. May take hours, but—”

But Ken was wrong. Within five minutes they had spotted an old four—story brick structure whose ornate cornice bore the words handy building. And on the directory board in its lobby they found *Randolph Lartain, Insurance*.

“We’ve hit it!” Sandy said excitedly. “Remember? That card was signed with the initial L. Come on. Let’s go right up and ask him if he’s seen Joe lately. Shock tactics. Catch him off guard.” He started for the self—service elevator.

Ken followed. “All right,” he agreed. “Unless he looks like a really

tough customer—somebody we ought to size up before we leap.”

Black letters on Lartain’s door advised them to walk in and the boys obeyed. The door opened on a small outer office, empty at the moment. But, in the inner office beyond, the huge figure of a man sat behind a desk. He looked up when he heard them and rose to his feet.

“Mr. Lartain?” Ken asked.

“Yes.” The voice was surprisingly quiet for the man’s size. Eyes beneath heavy black brows looked at them curiously. “Something I can do for you?”

“We wanted to know if you’d seen Joe Driscoll lately,” Sandy said quickly.

“Joe Driscoll?” The mouth quirked briefly. “I never saw him in my life.”

“But you wrote him a note the other day,” Ken said. “A warning note.”

“A warning! What’s this all about?” Lartain moved around the desk and came toward them. “Who are you?”

The boys stood still as he drew nearer.

“We’re from the Brentwood *Advance*” Ken said. “Joe works for the *Advance* too. He—”

“Did Joe tell you to come and see me?” Lartain asked.

“Then you do know him!” Sandy said quickly. “Where is he? What’s happened to him?”

Lartain’s eyes narrowed sharply. “I’m afraid I don’t get this,” he said. “I haven’t denied knowing Joe Driscoll, though it’s true I’ve never seen him. We’ve corresponded for ten years. We have—er—interests in common. And if something’s happened to him—”

“He apparently left his house,” Sandy broke in, “right after he got a note from you warning him about the Black One.” His fist clenched at his side. “We intend to find him,” he added.

“Of course he left.” The corner of Lartain’s mouth quirked again. “I’d have done the same.” Then the mouth suddenly straightened into a hard line. “Do you mean he left—and hasn’t come back?”

“That’s right,” Sandy said grimly. “We—”

“Who is the Black One, Mr. Lartain?” Ken asked quietly. “We’re worried about Joe. We’ve got to know.”

Lartain looked at them for a long moment before he answered. “I’m sorry,” he said. “This isn’t going to help. The Black One—that’s only a nickname, of course—is one of the rarer members of the finch family. I saw one last week, and wrote Joe to tell him about it. That’s the kind of thing we bird watchers always write each other about.”

CHAPTER V

THE MARSH

"Bird watchers!" Sandy repeated the words as blankly as if they were in a strange foreign tongue. "You mean people who watch birds?"

"That's right." Lartain nodded. "It's not everybody's hobby, but for people like Joe Driscoll and myself—well, I suppose you could say we're real fanatics."

Sandy's jaw thrust forward and he shot Ken a swift glance. "Joe's no fanatic—about anything."

Lartain's eyes widened slightly. "You mean you don't believe me?" He swung abruptly around and re-entered the inner office. "Look here," he said over his shoulder.

By the time the boys had followed him into the small room he had pulled out a deep file drawer. "Here." Lartain handed them a folder of papers.

They looked at it together. It contained a sheaf of letters. Each was in Joe Driscoll's unmistakable neat script, each signed by him, and each one reported the sight of some unusual bird, the northward or southward flight of emigrating flocks, the finding of a nest or a setting of eggs.

Sandy flushed as he leafed through them.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"We believe you, Mr. Lartain," Ken said. "But we don't know much about Joe—what he does when he's not at the *Advance* office, or where he came from before he worked there. So we don't have much to go on, now that we're trying to find out why he's disappeared."

"Would you mind telling me about it?" Lartain asked.

The boys glanced at each other briefly, and then Ken launched into a quick recital of the day's events.

Lartain's big body rocked back and forth on his heels as he listened. When Ken finished speaking he shook his head.

"It doesn't make any sense," Lartain said. "I told you I'd never seen Joe, but I do feel I've got to know a good deal about him through his letters. He's a lot better bird watcher than I am—more patient, and knows more about the subject." He smiled briefly. "In fact, when I saw the Black One last week, it was about the first time I'd ever beat Joe at the game. I was really crowing over him."

He shook his head slowly. "Joe's never crowed over me—he's much too gentle and considerate. So I agree with you that he wouldn't have pulled a disappearing act without letting you people know."

“Has he ever mentioned anything in his letters about where he used to live or what he used to do?” Ken asked.

“Not that I remember,” Lartain answered. “We both stick pretty close to bird talk. I never even knew where he worked. But wait!” He straightened up. “I do seem to remember him saying something about once having tried to interest his students in birds.”

Ken and Sandy looked at each other.

“It fits,” Ken said, and Sandy nodded. “Joe would have been a swell teacher.”

“But it’s not much help now,” Sandy added.

“Except in a negative way,” Lartain pointed out. “Doesn’t it suggest at least that Joe hasn’t been kidnapped? If he used to be a teacher, and is now a janitor—financially speaking, he’d hardly be worth kidnapping.” Lartain looked down at his outsized black shoes. “Don’t know why I even thought of such a melodramatic thing,” he muttered.

There was silence in the little office for a moment. Ken and Sandy were all too aware that they had also envisioned melodramatic—and extremely unpleasant—explanations for Joe’s absence.

“How do you watch birds?” Ken asked suddenly. “What do you do? Where do you go?”

Lartain leaned back against his desk. “We do just what it sounds as if we did—we watch, observe. Most of us keep dated records of the species we’ve seen—their choice of nest location, nest—building materials—things like that. Some of us keep photographic records too.” He scratched his chin. “And as for *where* we watch—well, some birds come near human habitations. For others we go into the woods, the swamps, along the coast ...” He shrugged. “Different species haunt different kinds of country.”

“What kind does the Black One like?” Ken asked.

“Swamps—marshy ground,” Lartain answered promptly. “The one I wrote Joe about I saw in a marshy spot on the edge of Colfax, about an hour after dawn. Last Friday, that was. I came into the office a little later, and wrote Joe immediately.”

Ken nodded. “Joe got the note on Saturday. So Sunday morning would have been his first chance to go looking for it himself. Brentwood’s north of here—so at this season of the year the bird might have been heading in that direction.”

“That’s right.” Lartain looked puzzled. “But are you trying to suggest that Joe’s disappearance has anything to do with bird watching? Doesn’t sound very logical. We just *look*—we’re about the most harmless fellows in the world.”

“I’m just trying to get times straightened out,” Ken said, “so that maybe we can pick up his trail.”

“Wish I could be more help,” Lartain said.

Sandy grinned faintly. "At least you've eliminated the possibility that Joe might be running away from some sinister underworld character known as the Black One."

They left Lartain's office a few minutes later, assuring him that they would let him know if Joe turned up.

"May sound odd to say you're fond of somebody you've never even seen," Lartain said, "but that's how I feel about Joe Driscoll."

When the boys were back in the car once more, Ken said abruptly, "Where's the nearest marsh to Joe's house?"

"You going to take up bird watching now?" Sandy asked.

Ken shook his head. "We're still watching for Joe," he said briefly. "Joe was at the office Saturday night. Let's say he got home by five—thirty Sunday morning, had breakfast, left his dishes, and went right out to look for the Black One. That's logical, isn't it?"

"Those dishes in the sink could have been left there Monday," Sandy pointed out.

"Could be," Ken agreed. "But remember the calendar sheet read Sunday. Anyway, it's safe to assume that Joe hurried out, as soon as he could make it—he probably knew the bird was more likely to be visible at dawn."

Sandy nodded tentative agreement, and Ken repeated, "So where's the marsh nearest his house?"

Sandy thought a moment. Ken waited, aware that his friend knew all the country around Brentwood as well as he knew his own hand.

"There's one right across the highway from Joe's house," Sandy said finally. And then, glancing out at the graying sky, he pressed his foot down on the accelerator. "We'd better hurry. It's going to be dark pretty soon."

Sandy spoke again at the end of ten miles. "At least we know Joe isn't lying hurt somewhere in your swamp. We did get a card from him."

"That's right," Ken agreed. And he added a moment later, "Andy'll probably prove to be right, after all. Joe's visiting a sick stepbrother, whose name is something other than Driscoll—and something happened to Joe's sense of humor so that he suddenly thought it was funny to talk about pieing type."

"Oh, sure," Sandy said, disbelief loud in his voice.

Half an hour later he was slowing the car on the highway as it approached the lane leading off to Joe's house.

"Marsh begins somewhere along here," Sandy muttered. "Runs from the highway back to the railroad tracks—and a little way beyond them, I think. It's not a real swamp—just marshy in spots."

He brought the car to a halt on the shoulder, just opposite Joe's lane.

“If Joe uses the marsh a lot, he may have made a path into it right here.”

“That makes good sense,” Ken applauded. “Unless,” he added, “there’s a ready—made road somewhere near.”

“I think there’s a rough trail back there somewhere.” Sandy jerked his head in the direction from which they had come. “Railroad maintenance trucks use it to get at the right of way. But let’s try here.”

His last word was inaudible as the sound of a train whistle split the air. And a moment later, across the uneven scrub of the marsh, they saw a long streamliner rounding the bend from the direction of Brentwood. Its headlight painted a white path almost parallel to the highway and some thousand feet away—a brilliant streak that seemed to intensify the gathering darkness. The locomotive slid under an overhead signal bridge and sped on westward.

Ken flicked on the flashlight in his hand. “Come on,” he said briskly. “We’re looking for a path.”

A moment later his downward—pointing beam illuminated a strip of trampled grass on the slope that dipped away from the built-up highway. With Sandy beside him, Ken scrambled down to the damp ditch at the foot of the rise, stepped over the trickle of water, and picked up the narrow trail on its other side.

Ken let out his breath. “This is it, I guess.”

“Looks like it.”

They moved forward slowly, through the dry rustling weeds on either side of the tiny path. It ran straight toward the railroad for about a hundred feet, over solid ground, and then began to wind and twist around tangled bushes and low wet areas that gleamed darkly in Ken’s light. As the ground around them grew more and more damp, the light frequently picked up the bright early spring green of leafy skunk cabbages. And when the rumble of the train had finally died to silence, they could hear the low insistent call of peepers from somewhere near by.

Sandy stepped from the grassy border onto the path itself. “No clear footprints or anything here to protect,” he muttered. “And I keep imagining snakes there in the weeds.”

Another train whistle reached them. And another train—this one eastbound—hammered across the rails, its brightly lighted windows emphasizing the swiftness with which night was coming down.

Suddenly, about halfway between the highway and the railroad tracks, elevated on their passage across the marsh, the path divided into two. One branch led to the right, one leftward at an angle.

“Which way?” Ken asked.

Sandy sighed. “Who knows? We’re not even sure this is Joe’s path. Kids may have made it, or hobos, or—” He shrugged. “And even if Joe

has come through here, what are we looking for?"

"If we knew, maybe we wouldn't have to be looking for it." There was an edge to Ken's voice too.

He stepped forward a few feet into the right branch of the path, and flashed his light along it. The tip of the beam was blunted against a heavy clump of bushes, still partially clothed with last year's leaves, standing some fifty feet beyond.

"Maybe bird watchers use cover, like duck hunters do," Ken said quietly. "Those bushes look like good protection. Let's take a look."

He led the way forward. The narrow gap in the bushes, directly ahead of them, was visible when they were still several feet away.

A moment later both boys were standing inside a tiny roomlike enclosure, walled on all sides by the five-foot growth. In summer, when the bushes were in full leaf, it would be a close green cave.

Ken's light fell on a crude homemade bench lying on its side on the dry packed earth.

"Somebody comes here. And spends a lot of time," he said.

"Certainly looks like it." Sandy stooped suddenly and picked up a small yellow carton half concealed by dead leaves at the foot of the bushes. Silently he held it out.

"What is it?" Ken stepped close, trained his flash on the object in Sandy's hand.

Rain had obliterated much of the lettering and warped the fragile shape, but Sandy answered decisively. "Box for a roll of film. Size six—sixteen. That's what Joe uses for that old folding camera he has."

"So Joe definitely does come to this place."

"That sounds like a safe assumption. And he definitely does watch birds—even takes picture of them sometimes." Sandy's voice rose on the last word. "So what? What does that prove? We're not interested in what Joe does with his spare time. We want to know where he is—right now!"

"Sure. But hasn't it occurred to you that people who observe birds are in a good spot to observe other things too?"

"Like what?" Sandy chopped the words off short.

"Like a crime—maybe." Ken turned slowly around in the small enclosed space, his eyes staring out into the darkness over the five-foot wall. "Who knows what Joe might have seen—say, on Sunday morning? And what kind of threat he became to somebody, as a result of what he saw?"

A locomotive whistled mournfully in the distance. And when the long note died away the air was curiously silent and permeated with a deep, damp chill.

Both boys shivered. The marsh seemed suddenly full of hidden menace.

CHAPTER VI

BLINKING LIGHTS

"Bur *what* could he have seen?" Sandy asked hoarsely. And the wind, rustling the reeds and the bushes, seemed to whisper the same words over and over. After a moment Sandy repeated them aloud again, changing the emphasis this time. "What *could* he have seen?"

"That's our job for tomorrow," Ken said slowly. "When it's light we'll go over this whole marsh. Inch by inch, if we have to. If something happened around here last Sunday—something that Joe saw—we ought to be able to find some signs of it."

"But what could it have been? What kind of crime?" Sandy persisted. "There's nothing around here to steal," he went on. "It couldn't have been a holdup. Who else but Joe would have been around here at that hour? He wouldn't have been worth holding up—and even if he had been, why would he have disappeared afterward?"

"We don't know that yet. We've got to stick to what we do know."

"And what do we know?" Sandy demanded.

"Not much," Ken admitted. He prodded the overturned bench with his toe. "This suggests that Joe left here in a hurry. His unwashed dishes suggest he didn't go back home right away."

"But who washed the dishes this morning?" Sandy asked. And before Ken could answer he went on. "Your theory is—I take it—that Joe is being held a prisoner somewhere, because he's a threat to a criminal. But in that case how do you explain the dish washing? Or the post card, either, for that matter? It was in Joe's writing"

"Whoever's holding him wants to prevent an investigation of Joe's disappearance," Ken suggested. "The dishes were washed and the house locked up, and the card was mailed just so nobody would snoop around the way we're doing this moment. But Joe had to be persuaded to write the card himself, so it would be believed—which gave him a chance to signal us with that pidd—type stuff."

"And how long is he going to be held in this—this condition? Or hasn't your theory been worked out that far, Sherlock Holmes?" The effort at scorn in Sandy's voice betrayed his concern.

"I don't know." Ken's own voice sounded helpless. "If a crime was committed Sunday morning, the criminal—or criminals—ought to be well away by now. And if Joe wasn't set free when they left ..." He sucked in his breath sharply. "Let's get home and talk this over with Pop and Bert."

Ken's flashlight snapped around toward the opening that gave onto the path.

“Hold it!” Sandy bent swiftly toward a small white speck that had suddenly sprung into prominence near the narrow entrance to the enclosure. When he straightened again he was holding a cigarette stub.

“Joe doesn’t smoke cigarettes,” Sandy said slowly, staring down at it. “He uses a pipe.”

Ken poked at the flattened paper cylinder, turning it over on Sandy’s broad palm.

“Gibraltars,” Ken said, reading the small gray type. “Ever hear of that brand?”

Sandy shook his head. “Sounds like it might be a British brand.”

Ken wrapped the stub in a scrap of paper and slipped it into his pocket.

Outside the protective shelter of the clump of bushes, they followed Ken’s flashlight beam back along the path toward the highway. Behind them, on the railroad tracks, a long freight ground around the curve heading west, its great engine almost shaking the air with its pounding exhaust.

The boys turned to watch it pass under the signal bridge, saw the heavy smoke cover the green light, and then blow away to disclose the signal arm down and the red light glowing.

Ken was turning toward the highway once more as Sandy clutched his arm.

“Kill your light,” Sandy said. “And look over there —by the signal.”

The freight train was still rumbling beneath the overhead steel structure that supported the semaphores. But it wasn’t the signals nor the train to which Sandy was calling his attention.

He seemed to be staring at the darkness right at the foot of the bridge.

“There!” he said suddenly. “See it?”

A small white light had winked rapidly on and off at the foot of the bridge, almost on a level with the tracks on their elevated right of way.

“Yes,” Ken said.

The white light winked on and off again. Then it came on once more, remained steady for a second, and described a circle.

Ken looked swiftly eastward and westward along the tracks.

“Look!” This time it was he who grabbed Sandy’s arm.

Five hundred feet to the east of the bridge—and the winking white light at the foot of it—a second white light blinked on and off, blinked again, and described a circle.

The light at the foot of the signals responded with an answering blink. And then both of them vanished.

Almost immediately the semaphore over the nearer passenger track—the one running along the outside of the embankment, nearest to the boys—swung down to a horizontal position, and the light turned red, like the one above the freight track.

The caboose of the freight rumbled beneath its signal, and on into the darkness. Slowly the rhythmic sound of the steel wheels settled into the quiet of early evening.

The boys stood still, ears and eyes alert. A minute passed by—another—and then a third. The blinking white lights had not reappeared.

The semaphore over the freight track lifted to a forty—five degree angle, and its light turned to yellow. The passenger signal was still bright red.

“Maybe—” Sandy began quietly.

A hoarse whistle from the direction of Brentwood cut him off. A Diesel locomotive came around the curve, its powerful headlight drilling a hole into the night. The train began to slow down. Sparks flew off its wheels. Hot brake shoes shrieked their complaint.

The train ground to a stop when its engine was a scant hundred feet from the red light barring the passenger track.

And then the signal changed from red to green.

There was a momentary pause—as if the train itself were startled—and then the throb of the idling Diesel deepened to a roar, and the train moved off on its interrupted journey.

“I don’t know much about railroads,” Sandy said softly, “but those blinking white lights certainly looked fishy. They seem to have stopped now—but let’s take a look.”

Ken was staring fixedly at the spot where they had first caught sight of the winking white light. As he looked, it signaled once more—blinked quickly on and off twice, and then drew a circle on the darkness.

Ken’s eyes swung to the point where the answering signal had appeared. But no second white light blinked in response this time.

Instead, at that same place, a pair of headlights flared unexpectedly, an engine roared, and there was the clear sound of tires grinding over rough gravel.

It was simple for the boys to follow the truck’s progress along the foot of the embankment, and to watch it turn toward the highway on a course that would bring it out on the concrete west of the convertible, parked at Joe’s lane.

Even before it made the turn the boys were already hurrying along the path.

“I’d like to see that truck,” Sandy muttered. “What would it be doing here at night?” On the last word he set his foot in a thick puddle

of ooze.

Ken, behind him, side—stepped in time to avoid it, reached out and hauled Sandy back into the narrow channel of the path. “Take it easy,” he cautioned. “We’ll never beat it to the highway, anyway. Look where it is now.”

Already the truck’s headlights were lifting skyward as it rose up the steep grade to the pavement. But halfway up it stopped, to avoid turning into the road in the path of a car zooming along the highway.

For an instant the oncoming car’s headlights illuminated the truck’s broad side.

Sandy grunted.

The truck was painted the unmistakable fire—engine red used by the railroad for all its rolling stock. And its door bore the words, in clear yellow letters: emergency repair division *Signal Department*

Sandy shamefacedly scraped his muddy shoe on the grass, as the truck climbed on up to the now—deserted highway, swung on the concrete, and moved away past their own parked convertible.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s go home. But it did look peculiar—all those lights flashing around.”

“It sure did.” There was an absent note in Ken’s voice. “But ...” He let the word trail off.

Sandy took the flashlight from him and turned it on his muddy shoe. “But what? What’s eating you?”

“I don’t know,” Ken said. “I thought I had something for a second—but it’s gone now.” He shook his head. “Maybe it’ll come back to me, whatever it was.”

Sandy grinned. “Well, I hope it was a better idea than mine was. Let’s leave this particular brain storm out of our report to Pop.”

They didn’t leave it out, of course. Sandy recounted it good—naturally himself, at the end of their detailed recital of everything they had done and the little they had learned that day.

When he finished he looked up at Ken, Pop, and Bert, sitting solemnly in the deserted office of the *Advance*. The hands of the electric clock on the wall pointed to nine thirty. From the shop in the rear of the building there sounded, faintly in the silence, the tinkle of type metal cooling in the now quiet linotype machine.

“So we scratch off the cryptic note,” Pop said, finally. He snorted. “Bird watching! And Joe’s the one man I ever knew who had an intelligent theory about King *Lear*.”

Bert grinned briefly. “Just proves that to some people live birds are as interesting as dead kings. Maybe you’re the one who should be snorted at, Pop.”

Pop ignored the remark, and Bert swung his feet off the desk and let them come down on the floor with a thump.

"I think Ken and Sandy are on the right track," Bert said. "Something Joe saw in the marsh Sunday morning is the key to this whole thing." He lifted his shoulders and let them fall. "But what it is—or how we'd go about discovering it—" He shrugged again.

"We can certainly give that marsh a good going over in daylight," Sandy said.

"Yes, that seems indicated," Bert said. "But—"

Pop interrupted him. "You trusted this fellow, Lartain?"

"He certainly seemed all right," Ken told him, and Sandy nodded agreement.

"Wouldn't hurt to check up, though," Pop muttered, and pulled the phone toward himself over the scarred desk top.

He asked for the toll operator, put through a call to a lawyer acquaintance in Colfax, and hung up five minutes later nodding his head.

"Harry gives him a clean bill," he reported. "Only thing wrong with Lartain, in his opinion, is that he isn't aggressive enough about his insurance business." Pop smiled wryly. "Seems he wastes too much time bird watching."

"Well, I guess that's that," Bert said. "Don't you think—?" But he stopped, to give Ken a chance to speak.

"Don't you think we ought to take this to Andy again?" Ken suggested.

"Just what I was about to say," Bert nodded.

The telephone rang shrilly.

"Probably Mom," Pop said, reaching for the instrument. "I promised her we wouldn't sit up half the night over—" He cleared his throat and said briskly into the mouthpiece, "Brentwood *Advance*."

A moment later his eyebrows edged upward, and he groped for a pencil and a scratch pad. "O.K.," he said. "Go ahead." The pencil scribbled rapidly.

"That all?" Pop said finally. He was staring down at the words he had written. "All right—thanks ... Wait a minute, Jake. Where was it filed? ... You sure? Can you give me that? ... O.K." He made another note. "Thanks," he said again, and set the phone slowly back into its cradle.

"Telegram," he reported soberly. "Addressed to me. Signed Joe Driscoll." He looked down at his notes and read them aloud. " 'Brother's condition progressing favorably. Should be back on job Friday. Important you don't try to contact me here. Repeat important. Letter follows.' "

"Where was it filed?" Ken repeated the question Pop had asked the local office.

"Pay station. Crandon exchange," Pop looked once more at his

notes. "Crandon six—eight—four—three." Suddenly he grabbed the phone again. "If Joe just sent the message through, he might still be near that phone booth."

Three faces watched him expectantly as he barked the number at the toll operator, and tapped his ink—stained fingers on the desk waiting for an answer.

Three bodies instinctively leaned forward with his as Pop said, "Crandon six—eight—four—three? ... Listen, son, I'm trying to get in touch with a small gray—haired chap who recently put through a call from that phone. Can you—?" He broke off as a voice crackled through the instrument.

The veins swelled on Pop's forehead as he listened.

There was the audible click of the phone being hung up at the other end.

Pop's lips pursed slowly in and out, as he tried to control his anger.

"Well?" Bert prodded.

"All—night diner," Pop said. "Short—order cook answered." His voice rose in spite of himself. "Said people used the phone all night. How could he be expected to notice who they were? There were no customers in the diner right now—but for my information he wouldn't have called any of them to the phone in any case. Boss might object." Pop's fist struck the desk a baffled blow.

They all looked at him in silence for a moment.

"If Joe'd only phoned *us*—instead of sending a wire!" Pop roared.

"At least Joe's made it clear that he doesn't want us to try to get in touch with him," Bert said. "I should imagine that goes for the police too."

"What makes you sure Joe sent the wire?" Sandy demanded.

"Anyone could have given his name over the telephone."

"I'm sure he *didn't*," Ken said.

They all swung to stare at him.

"You're *sure*?" Pop barked. "And just how do you—?"

Ken spoke slowly. "I'm trying to remember it exactly," he said.

"Joe gave me a lecture here one night—he was sitting there at your desk, Pop, and he'd just read over some story I'd written. He got to talking about how language changes—how new words are invented, and old ones change their meaning. And he said 'contact,' which had originally been a noun, was now being used as a verb by practically everybody."

Ken shut his eyes for a second. "And then he said," he went on, "Of course I'm old—fashioned, but that's one thing I can't bring myself to do. I could never say 'Contact me.' Just wouldn't sound right somehow."

Pop spoke heavily. "Ken's right," he said. "He's right. Joe never did

send that wire.”

CHAPTER VII

THE BIRD WATCHER

Dawn was still half an hour away when Ken pulled the red convertible to a stop in front of the Brentwood Highway Diner. When he rasped the hand brake up sharply, the sound roused Sandy from a doze.

The redhead yawned and shivered, wiped the film of moisture from his window, and peered out at the brightly lighted eating place.

"Good," he mumbled. "Coffee."

They had remained in the office with Pop and Bert until well past midnight the night before, exploring every possibility suggested by the telegram. But Ken's original conclusion was finally accepted by all of them: Joe himself would never have worded a wire that way.

"Not even as a signal," Ken had pointed out, "the way we think he was using the type—pieing reference. If he wanted to signal us he'd use something very obvious—like that."

"So somebody else sent the wire." Bert took it up.

"And it's intended not only as an assurance to us that Joe's all right, but also as a warning to us not to snoop around looking for him. *Important* you don't try to contact me here," he quoted.

"In other words, we're supposed to keep our noses out of Joe's affairs—or somebody else's," Sandy said. "Are we also supposed to believe that if we don't stop snooping around, Joe will be made to suffer the consequences?"

"In that case—and I think that's exactly what this wire could mean—maybe we shouldn't urge Andy to get on the job right away," his older brother said quietly. "A police uniform is pretty obvious."

"Wait a minute," Ken had said. "You said 'if we don't *stop* snooping,' Sandy. I think you hit something. That wire was sent because somebody learned that there *was* some snooping going on."

"But who?" Pop demanded. "If it wasn't Lartain—and he seems in the clear—who else knows you've been inquiring around for Joe?"

When they realized that the only other people of whom they had asked questions were the bus—terminal ticket seller and the veteran postmaster of Crandon, they gave it up.

"At least we can take a look around the marsh as soon as it's light," Ken had said finally. "Maybe after that we'll have more to go on."

And they had all finally dragged themselves home for a few hours' sleep, after the boys had promised Pop that they would do nothing more dangerous than *look* the following morning, and report back to the *Advance* immediately.

The diner's coffee was hot, and an order of ham and eggs helped too. But when they stopped the car the next time, behind a billboard some half mile from the little marsh path they had followed before, the damp chill seemed to penetrate to the bone.

"Here goes," Sandy said, slinging a binocular case around his neck. The words turned to white vapor in the air.

They walked in silence along the shoulder of the road until they reached the path, took a quick look around—there was no visible sign of life anywhere—and slid down the grade. From somewhere inside the marsh a bird rose in startled flight, but otherwise they heard no sound until they were once more inside the little bushy enclosure with its overturned bench.

"The idea is to do what we think Joe must have done?" Sandy asked then.

Ken nodded silently.

Sandy's flaming head towered higher above the tangled walls than Joe Driscoll's would have done, but Ken figured that even Joe could have seen over the barrier in all directions.

Binoculars to his eyes, Sandy made a complete turn. "Not a creature was stirring—not even a mouse," he reported grimly. "If he saw something on the highway—"

"Let's concentrate on the opposite direction first—toward the railroad," Ken suggested. "If the Black One is a marsh bird, it seems likely Joe would have been looking for him there rather than on the drier land toward the road."

Sandy shrugged agreement, and turned the glasses toward the tracks, glinting now in the first rays of light glowing in the east.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to be seeing," he muttered, after a moment, "but whatever it is I'm not seeing it." He dropped the glasses abruptly. "This is crazy. We don't even know—"

"Wait a minute," Ken interrupted. "Let's not give up so easily. What *can* we see from here?"

"The railroad."

"All right—all right. But I mean in detail. Start there at the signal bridge, and recite everything you see from there on."

Sandy sighed. "O.K." He lifted the glasses again. "The bridge and the signals. Couple of hundred feet of low marshland. Remains of the old iron mine, just on the other side of the tracks. Then—"

"What iron mine?"

"You can see it without glasses." Sandy pointed. "There—see that mound about a thousand feet beyond the tracks? Near that old shed?"

"All right. I see it. Go ahead."

"Then more railroad track and more marshland. Then a corner of the Brentwood reservoir—it just shows between some trees. And then

more tracks and more marsh. Also more trees.” The patience in Sandy’s voice was thin. “And that’s all,” he added disgustedly.

“Seems hopeless all right,” Ken said, after a moment’s silence. “Unless somebody’s been getting ideas about the abandoned mine or the reservoir.”

“What kind of ideas? Sabotage?” Sandy sounded scornful. “That mine was abandoned before the Civil War—believe me, there’s nothing there worth blowing up. And I can’t see an enemy concentrating on the Brentwood water supply.”

“You could hide something in an old mine shaft.” Ken had upended the bench and was huddled on it “Such as stolen loot,” he went on. “Or a body.”

Sandy’s eyes turned on him. “Joe’s?”

Ken shook his head. “We’re trying to figure out what Joe might have *seen*. Now who’s getting whacky ideas?”

Sandy sighed. “Well, don’t suggest things like that.”

Ken went on soberly. “If Joe saw somebody hide something there—and then he himself was seen—”

Sandy had dropped the binoculars into their case and snapped it shut. “Let’s stop wondering and go look.”

They left the enclosure, retraced their steps a way, and finally found a path that crossed the marsh clear to the railroad.

Sandy was climbing up the embankment when Ken let out a loud “Ouch!”

“What happened?” Sandy swung around.

Ken was rubbing his shin with one hand, and pointing to a stake driven into the ground with the other.

“Walked into it,” he said between his teeth.

Sandy grinned unsympathetically. The sun was definitely up now, and Sandy’s spirits had risen with it. “If you’d look where you’re going —”

“Couldn’t see it. It was hidden in the grass. You certainly have a sympathetic nature.” Ken straightened up. His brows drew together. “Isn’t this about where we saw that second light blinking last night?”

“Just about.” Sandy looked up and down the tracks. “Probably that’s why the stake is there—to mark the spot for the repair crew. What’s wrong with that?”

Ken bent over, picked something up, and joined Sandy at the top of the railroad embankment. “Look.”

Sandy glanced at the cigarette butt on Ken’s palm, and then peered closer. “Gibraltar! Same—”

Ken nodded. “Same brand we found in Joe’s bushes.”

Sandy whistled quietly. “Maybe there *was* something funny going on here last night.”

"Come on. One thing at a time. First the mine."

They crossed the four tracks and were soon following an old spur line that led to the mine, walking awkwardly from one rotted tie to the next. The spur rose gently, and when they were at the barricaded entrance to the old shaft, they were high enough to look back over the railroad, some thousand feet away, and over another thousand feet of marsh beyond it as far as the highway.

But the mine entrance, they found, was strongly boarded up. The rusted nails in the barricade proved it had stood untouched for years.

Ken sighed, half in disappointment, half in relief.

And after a moment he and Sandy walked together to the partially collapsed shed whose empty windows overlooked the whole area.

There was nothing at all inside—no battered furniture on the dirt floor, no signs of recent habitation.

"Good observing post, though," Sandy said, taking out the binoculars again. "Maybe Joe's been here too."

"Somebody's been here," Ken said suddenly, and pointed to half a dozen cigarette butts flattened on the ground.

They stooped low to look at them.

"Another Gibraltar," Ken said. "And another." He got to his feet. "Let me have the glasses a minute."

He stood with them at a window on the railroad side of the shack. "Plain as day," he said a moment later.

"What is?"

"Joe's little hideaway in the bushes. If you were in there now I could see you easily. Look."

Sandy took the glasses, focused, and nodded his head. "And if our Gibraltar smoker was in here, he could have seen Joe." He lowered the glasses slowly. "But what would he be doing here?"

By unspoken agreement they gave the inside and outside of the shed a careful going over.

"O.K.," Ken said finally. "There's certainly been nothing hidden here." He frowned. "But why else would anybody come to a place like this?"

"Another bird watcher might come," Sandy pointed out.

"The world isn't entirely populated with bird watchers," Ken reminded him. "Besides, another bird watcher wouldn't be a danger to Joe, and our theory is—"

"I know," Sandy interrupted him impatiently. "That Joe saw some signs of a crime—of a past, present, or future crime—that made him a threat to somebody. But our theory could be wrong."

"Wait a minute!" Ken said excitedly. "A *future* crime! That would explain it! Somebody was planning something here, and Joe learned about it!"

“But what kind of fools would come to a damp deserted spot like this to plan a crime?” Sandy asked, obviously unimpressed. “Why wouldn’t they sit in a comfortable room somewhere, with—?”

“Because the crime was going to be committed here —when the time came.” Ken glanced through the window at the broad shining tracks of the railroad. “A train robbery, maybe!”

“Are you serious?” Sandy scoffed. “A train holdup in this day and age? You’ve been seeing too many bad western movies, about the days when—”

“Have you got any better ideas?” Ken demanded.

“Not right now. But that still doesn’t make yours good.”

“I admit it.” Ken sighed. “We just don’t—” He stopped, and cocked his head in a listening attitude.

Sandy’s eyes widened. He had heard it too—the sound of a truck engine, growing rapidly louder.

They swung to the window and looked out to see a brilliantly red railroad repair truck following a rutted lane toward the tracks. It lurched and swayed over the rough marshy terrain, its heavy tires throwing up sheets of muddy water each time they struck a puddle.

“Same one we saw last night?” Sandy murmured.

Ken adjusted the glasses and peered through them a moment.

“Could be. Same coloring. Same lettering.”

The truck halted near the signal bridge and two men got out. They opened the door of a cabinet at the base of the skeleton steel structure, and poked around inside. One of them lifted his head to watch the semaphore over the westbound passenger track lower to the red position, remain there an instant, and then lift to yellow. Then it returned to the vertical, the light flashing green once more, and the men stepped a few feet away and talked.

Ken, reporting these details to Sandy, added, “Now one of them is looking at his watch.” He paused. “Now they’re lighting cigarettes.”

A train whistle sounded and an express came around the bend from the direction of Brentwood. When it thundered under the signal bridge the semaphore over its track dipped promptly to the red position. Not until the last car had passed were the two on the far side of the track visible once more.

“He’s looking at his watch again,” Ken reported. “And now they’re both just standing there.”

The seconds slid slowly by. The semaphore lifted halfway, to the caution angle, and its light changed to yellow. Half a minute later the arm moved to vertical and the light was green again.

“They’re closing the cabinet,” Ken reported. “They’re starting back toward the truck.”

“O.K.,” Sandy told him. “I can see that much.”

They watched the truck being backed around and started on its rough trip back to the highway.

"Highly educational," Sandy commented. "And about as illuminating as everything else we've done this morning. Are we through here?"

"I guess so."

But by common consent they made their return journey to the highway by way of the semaphore tower, and both of them glanced at the ground. Two cigarette butts lay there, half trodden into the cinders, and without a word both boys bent to look at them.

An instant later they both straightened.

"Not Gibaltars." Ken voiced the thought for both of them. "If they had been, we—"

Sandy touched his arm. "We've got company."

Ken followed his glance. A large sedan had stopped on the highway where the path dipped into the marsh and, as they watched, a figure in a dark suit climbed slowly out of the front seat. The man shut the door, leaned back for a word with the driver, and then turned into the path as the car started up again, toward Brentwood.

Ken had the glasses up to his eyes. "Missed the license number," he muttered, and swung the glasses to aim them at the figure now carefully picking his way toward them.

"Let's meet him halfway," Ken suggested, his voice so decisive that Sandy's half-spoken word of objection was never completed.

The stranger looked up in surprise when they approached him. His round, plump face was pink in the sunlight, his eyes were bright behind rimless glasses.

"Bless me!" he said, blinking. "You startled me!" His plump hands straightened the eyeglasses, and he saw the binoculars around Ken's neck. "Are you bird watchers too?" he asked, smiling and drawing a small pair of sport glasses from his pocket.

"This is a good spot for it," Ken said noncommittally. "Do you come here often?"

"My first time. Thought from the highway it looked like a good place, and told the chauffeur to leave me here for an hour." He smiled again. "Anything interesting on hand this morning?"

Ken's eyes flashed a warning to Sandy before he answered. "Well, yes. We did get a quick view of a black-tailed pied typer—just a flash as he went by. Over there." He gestured vaguely.

"Really? How interesting! Maybe I'll have the luck to see him too. Was it a male?" The man was looking at Sandy.

The redhead swallowed. "Oh, definitely," he said.

"Ill keep my fingers crossed." The round face smiled again, the eyeglasses flashing, and then the plump figure bowed slightly and

went on down the path past them.

Ken and Sandy continued toward the highway.

Sandy waited until they were out of earshot before he exploded. “A fine bird watcher you are! Couldn’t you invent a better name than *pied typer*? Of all the phony—sounding—”

“I’m as good a bird watcher as he is,” Ken said quietly. “*He* didn’t seem to notice anything wrong.”

CHAPTER VIII

OUTDISTANCED

Sandy took two steps before a delayed reaction to Ken's words halted him. He turned halfway around, but Ken's hand stopped his swing and shoved him forward along the path to the highway.

"Keep moving," Ken muttered.

"But if he's a phony bird watcher—if he's not a bird watcher at all—then he might be—!"

"Take it easy," Ken cautioned. He waited until he could come abreast of Sandy, where the path widened slightly.

"There are a couple of possibilities, as a matter of fact," he went on then. "Maybe he is a real bird watcher, but so green at it that he doesn't know there's no such thing as a pied typer. Or maybe he's an experienced bird watcher and thinks we're the ones who are green, or crazy. Or—the third possibility—he's phony."

"That's the one I'm afraid of." Sandy spoke through clenched teeth. "If he's part of this whole funny business about Joe—and if something happens to Joe because we didn't keep away from things when we've been warned not to—"

"I said take it easy," Ken broke in. "I'm worried about Joe too. That's why I pulled that stunt back there—hoping to learn something. But it wasn't as smart as I thought it would be. We still don't really know anything. Maybe that man's a phony—but maybe he isn't."

They were scrambling up the rise to the road by then, and just short of the top Ken paused, put the glasses to his eyes, and trained them on the marsh.

"We've got a little more evidence for our suspicion, though," he said, after a moment. "For a man who says he's never been here before, he certainly found Joe's hiding place fast enough."

"That settles it so far as I'm concerned." There was mounting excitement in Sandy's voice. "He's the first real clue we've had. When he leaves here, we follow him." And then he stopped and his face clouded. "But then we might be putting Joe on a spot. We're so conspicuous in that red car. And if it's already been seen—"

"I know. I was thinking of that."

They were striding along the shoulder of the highway now, back toward the convertible.

"He *said* he was going to be picked up in an hour," Ken went on. "If that's true, one of us would have time to get back to town and exchange our car for Pop's or Bert's."

"But why should he have told us the truth?" Sandy asked. "If he's

what we think he is—and if he has any suspicion of who we are—he was certainly lying.”

“I know.” Ken began to walk faster. “How about this? Suppose you stay here, with the car, and I get a hitch back to town and return with Bert’s? In an emergency you could follow, in the convertible. But with any luck I’d be back in time.”

“That’s—“

Sandy’s words were cut off by a loud blast from an automobile horn.

A large, heavy sedan was approaching from the direction of Brentwood. The driver, a uniformed chauffeur wearing dark glasses, tapped the button again and the horn blared in warning. The vehicle passed them with a smooth whir of large tires.

“Is that the one?” Sandy asked.

They swung around in time to see the twin stop lights come alive. The car was slowing down. Ken had the glasses to his eyes before it stopped, at a spot where the plump man was already climbing the grade to the road.

But Ken lowered the glasses almost immediately. “Come on!” he said.

Together they ran the remaining few hundred feet to the billboard behind which the convertible was parked.

“Did you get the license number?” Sandy gasped.

“Not even the colors. All smeared with mud.”

Ken flung himself into the driver’s seat with the last word, and started the motor. Immediately he jammed it into reverse, and the rear wheels tore at the sod as the car lurched backward, out from behind the billboard and up the grade—gentler here—onto the highway.

Ken locked the wheels, and while the car was still rocking from the violence of his braking, shoved the lever into forward and stepped down on the accelerator.

The rear tires squealed and the convertible bucked ahead.

But in another instant Ken’s foot was off the accelerator and the car was slowing to a crawl.

A thousand feet away the big sedan was backing into the lane that led to Joe’s house. It stopped, and then came out onto the highway, headed in their direction. In a moment it swept by the convertible at high speed.

Ken barely waited until it was past to stop the car and slam the gears into reverse, racing the engine. The car hurled itself backward toward the wide spot in the road near the billboard. He cut the wheels sharply and the car swung off onto the shoulder. Immediately it rocketed back to the concrete again, heading after the sedan.

“Cost us half a minute,” Ken said grimly, forcing his foot to the floor board. “But he can’t be far away. Ought to see him around that curve.”

He took the corner at full speed, the tires protesting with a shriek as they fought for traction.

When the convertible straightened out again the road ahead was visible to the top of a rise half a mile ahead. And except for a large produce truck bearing toward them, there was not another car in sight.

Ken let the convertible slow momentarily, and then tramped on the gas pedal again.

“He must be over the hill already! We’ll get him!”

“Hold it! Take it easy!” Sandy said hoarsely. “Watch the Wilson driveway!”

“Where?” Ken kept his eyes on the road.

“Coming up! Slow down!” Sandy almost shouted.

Even as he yelled they were flashing past the narrow hedge—bordered driveway. But Sandy had been watching closely.

“It was there!” he told Ken. “Parked. Heading in.”

Ken pumped the brake pedal, checking their lunging speed as fast as he could without throwing the car into a skid.

Sandy, his head craned around to look through the rear window, kept his eyes glued to the driveway.

“It’s coming out—they’re going back! Turn around!”

Ken had the convertible slowed to a snail’s pace, his eyes raking the road ahead for a driveway or a wide shoulder to aid his turn. There was nothing in sight.

He cut the wheels sharply, heading the car across the road and bringing it to a stop with the front wheel at the very edge of a deep ditch. Then the car jerked backward across the concrete—and forward once more.

The right wheel balanced on the brink, clawed for a hold and made it.

A moment later the convertible was leaping forward down the road it had just covered, its engine strained to the utmost.

This time they were two minutes behind—two minutes and probably as many miles.

When they rounded the turn the road was bare of traffic for as far ahead as they could see.

They flashed by the lane to Joe’s house.

“Not in there,” Sandy reported.

“Where’s the next turn—off?” Ken was hunched over the wheel as if he were forcing the car ahead.

“County Line, I think. About three miles.” Sandy eyed the

speedometer, watched it climb another notch—and then another.

Ken eased the car around a long curve, hugging the right side of the road as they zoomed past a long truck and trailer headed eastward. The road was straight for the next mile ahead—and empty. He pushed the pedal to the floor.

“Easy,” Sandy cautioned a minute later.

Ken eased off the accelerator as the crossroad warning sign whipped past them. At the crossing he slowed to a full stop.

There was no sign of the sedan either to the right or to the left.

But before Ken could get underway again, Sandy said, “Wait!” In the next instant he was out of the car and standing in the middle of the highway, waving his arms to halt a truck that had just appeared, coming toward them over the rise beyond the crossing.

Air brakes hissed. The ponderous vehicle slowed down and stopped.

An irate driver stuck his head out of the window. “What’s the matter? You—?”

Sandy’s words cut through his. “Did you pass a black sedan just now?”

“Big one? Going like the dickens? Sure.” Interest had replaced the driver’s irritation. “What’s up?”

But Sandy was already back in the convertible, shouting his thanks.

Ken got the car moving again, and within a quarter mile it was back to its former speed. It didn’t slow down until Ken was forced to brake at the limits of a village.

As he eased through the little settlement he said quietly, “It’s no use. We’ll never catch them. They’ve probably turned off some place that we missed.”

Sandy’s face was grim and pale. “But there’s not much doubt about them now. Nobody drives like that unless they’re trying to get away.”

“And they probably have no doubts about us, either.” Ken pointed out bitterly.

“Well, the milk’s already spilt,” Sandy reminded him. “We did our best. They’d probably already seen us before our pudgy bird—watching friend even came into the marsh. We’d have been in sight from the road. And if they saw the car too—”

He broke off as Ken suddenly sat up straight. “Isn’t this the road to Crandon?” Ken demanded.

“Crandon! The post card! Sure—and they were headed this way! Come on!”

But Ken had the accelerator down to the floor before Sandy stopped speaking.

It was just half past eight, and the sun was high and bright when

they pulled off the road at the same spot where they had parked the day before. In front of them the door to the combined store and post office stood open, and a buzz of voices from inside indicated that Crandon's business day had already begun.

A few hundred feet ahead, on the other side of the street, a man was unlocking the gas pumps of a small service station.

Ken nodded toward him. "Do you suppose it would do any good to ask him about a big black sedan? I'm not even sure of the make. Do you know what it was?"

Sandy shook his head, but his hand was on the door handle. "We could try, anyway. Just ask him if he noticed a big seven—passenger sedan go by. There aren't so many of those on the road. And if it happens to belong around here—"

Ken put a hand on his arm. "Look," he said.

Sandy followed his glance.

Two houses beyond the post office was a comfortable square white house. A well-dressed man was just emerging from its open door.

"Isn't that the art dealer we met in Colfax?" Ken asked. "What was his name—De Lacey?"

"I guess it is," Sandy said, after a moment. "Guess he's buying up antiques around here too." He shrugged. "How about it? Shall I go ask questions at the gas station?"

De Lacey was walking at a leisurely pace along the sidewalk, heading for the post office. He was busy extracting a cigarette from a flat cardboard box, and didn't look up. When he was abreast of the convertible's hood he dropped the apparently empty box on the ground, and walked on into the building.

As soon as he was inside Ken slid out of the car and picked up the box.

Without a word he held the small scarlet rectangle under Sandy's eyes. The large gold letters on it spelled out the word "GIBRALTAR"!

CHAPTER IX

A LETTER FROM JOE

"Wow!" Sandy said softly, after a long startled moment. Then his fingers tightened on the edge of the door and his whole big body seemed to tense. "Now we've really got something! De Lacey!"

Ken was turning the bright red box over in his hand, almost absently. "It can't be," he said slowly.

"What can't be?" Sandy demanded. The complete lack of interest he had shown in De Lacey only a moment before now seemed a thousand years in the past. "What can't be?" he repeated, when Ken didn't answer. "It obviously *is*. There's no doubt of that box being here—or of De Lacey throwing it away. There's no doubt about the fact that a Gibraltar smoker was hanging around in the marsh, in highly suspicious places. And there's no doubt of the fact that mighty few people smoke that brand."

Ken nodded slowly. "No doubt at all," he agreed. "About any of those things. But what could a man like De Lacey possibly have to do with the sort of—well, whatever it is we think may have happened? He's a respectable, well-known man. I can't see him planning something illegal or criminal."

Sandy made an impatient gesture. "You mean he *looks* respectable—and somebody *told* us he was well known. What does that mean? What do we really know about him? Nothing!" he answered himself triumphantly. "The way he looks, and what Franklin said about him, don't make him a fine upright citizen. How do we *know* what he might be mixed up in?"

Ken dropped the cigarette box on the seat. "We don't," he agreed. "You're right again." He shook himself, as if to get rid of his lack of conviction. "All right—let's do a little checking. You might as well go on over to the service station, as we'd planned. Ask them about the sedan and see if you can find out whether it has any connection with De Lacey. I'll wait until De Lacey comes out of the post office, and then I'll use the pay phone in there to call Pop. He ought to be able to get some kind of quick report on De Lacey for us from Granger at Global News."

Ten minutes later they were both back in the convertible once more. When Ken returned, Sandy was already at the wheel.

"De Lacey went back into that white house," Ken said. "He hasn't come out again, has he?"

"Not since I've been here."

"O.K. Let's just sit here then. I've got to call Pop back in about

twenty minutes, to get the report from Granger. What did you find out?"

"De Lacey's car is a convertible—a brand—new black one. I saw it myself. It's in the garage being greased. It was brought in early this morning and won't be done for a while yet. I got nowhere at all with my questions about the big black sedan. If one went by here recently, he didn't notice it."

"Mmm. Well, I learned a little something too, talking to the postmaster after I'd called Pop. Seems De Lacey's been around these parts for about two weeks —boarding there at Mrs. Temple's." Ken nodded toward the white house next to the post office. "He goes off during the day, but he always comes back here at night."

"And what does he do when he goes off?"

"Buys old furniture and knickknacks." Ken grinned faintly. "Not very startling news, but it seems to be the truth. The postmaster's own sister got fifty dollars from him—from De Lacey, I mean—for an old mirror she hadn't even known was up in her attic. Mrs. Temple seems to be doing pretty well too. De Lacey pays her extra for the use of her old barn, to store his purchases in until he has a truck come out from New York to pick them up."

And then Ken added, in a fair imitation of the postmaster's voice, "Seems like a lot of foolishness to me —buyin' up old truck nobody could possibly want, and payin' good money for it! Why, the fellow bought a dozen old kerosene lamps from Mrs. Hudson and give her more money for 'em than they cost originally! And the family's had fifty years use out of 'em to boot!"

"All right." Sandy answered Ken's grin with a reluctant one of his own. "I'll admit it sounds legitimate enough." He struck the wheel lightly with his fist. "But wouldn't a smart man have a legitimate cover if he was doing something—well—something illegitimate?"

"He probably would," Ken agreed. And after a moment he went on, "I'll admit I wouldn't mind having a look inside that barn."

Sandy eyed him triumphantly. "You and me both." He reached toward the ignition key. "We could drive around the block and see what we could see from the back of Mrs. Temple's property."

Ken glanced at his watch. "All right. If there is such a thing as a block in Crandon."

Sandy swung the car out into the highway and drove slowly along. At the end of several hundred feet he turned right on a gravel road shaded by old trees. Large white houses, similar to Mrs. Temple's, were on either side. When they had passed several of them they reached another road, also graveled, parallel to the highway. Sandy turned right again, on it, and stopped a moment later.

"Looks like the rear of the post office and store—right there," he

said, pointing. "And this must be Mrs. Temple's back yard and barn."

The Temple property ran clear through from the highway, and the barn, a gray weather-beaten structure, had wide doors that opened on a dirt driveway leading to the road where they were parked.

The boys sat still for a moment, looking around. There seemed to be no curious passers-by, to question their presence. And no one was visible in the Temple yard, or near it.

Ken had his hand on the door when a sleek station wagon turned into the street, from the next crossroad heading toward them. A moment later it was swinging into the driveway that led to the Temple barn. Neat gold letters on the door read:

DE LACEY GALLERIES

Objets d'Art

Antiques

The body of the station wagon seemed to be filled with furniture, and as it drove away from them they could see a large grandfather's clock pillowed on an old quilt spread on the open tail gate.

The station wagon stopped before the closed barn door and its loud horn blasted the silence.

A moment later the double doors slid open, pushed back by an overalled figure who then stood aside while the vehicle entered. The driver got out, and he and the figure in overalls began to unload the cargo, lifting out the clock first and standing it upright with great care.

"There's a little too much company," Sandy said dejectedly, "for us to do any snooping right now." He leaned forward to look past Ken. "Of course, if they always leave the doors wide open like that—so that anybody could wander in and look around—maybe there's no reason to snoop after all. If—Oh—oh." He broke off.

De Lacey had just opened another pair of double doors on the far side of the barn, and walked in along the wide shaft of sunlight the opening admitted. His distinguished bearing and immaculate dress appeared strangely out of place in the jumble of old furniture, lamps, dishes, and clocks that half-filled the cavernous dusty interior.

"Do you want to just wander in and say hello?" Ken asked. "Maybe he'd let us look around."

Sandy looked uncomfortable. "No," he admitted. "If he'd happened to say where he was staying, when we met him yesterday, we could let him think we'd dropped in to see how an antique buyer operates. But—"

"It's time for me to call Pop again, anyway," Ken said. "Let's go back to the post office. Maybe De Lacey will come out of the house again, and you can just happen to see him and say hello—you know, accidentally."

“All right.”

Sandy sounded as if he had already lost his enthusiasm for investigating De Lacey and his interests, but he parked the convertible near Mrs. Temple’s gate.

“If he comes out,” he said, “I’ll say—with great surprise—‘Well, it’s Mr. De Lacey, isn’t it?’ And then if he turns pale and says, ‘Ah! So you’ve found me out—’”

“Shh!” Ken murmured.

De Lacey was rounding the Temple house and coming down the walk toward the gate.

Ken stepped out of the car, started for the post office, and glanced in the man’s direction with every indication of casualness. Their eyes met.

The art dealer recognized him immediately.

“Hello!” he said, with his pleasant smile. “We met yesterday, didn’t we? At the art show in Colfax?” He glanced at the car then, saw Sandy, and repeated his greeting.

“Looks as if reporting keeps you on the go as much as my business does me,” De Lacey went on. He smiled again. “Is there something exciting going on here in Crandon that I haven’t heard about?”

Ken spoke quickly. “I was just on my way in there”—he gestured toward the general store—“to make a phone call. Checking with the office on the address of somebody we’re supposed to see. Sure you haven’t got a story for us, Mr. De Lacey, on ‘Valuable Antiques I Have Discovered in Your Neighborhood?’”

De Lacey’s eyes twinkled. “Positive—for two reasons. One I gave you yesterday: the less publicity I get, the less I have to pay for things.”

Ken recalled the postmaster’s comment about De Lacey’s generous prices, but he didn’t mention it.

“And the second”—De Lacey shook his head sadly —“most of the things I’ve bought on this trip haven’t been worth my time—let alone a story. What some people try to sell me as ‘antiques’ would scare you half to death.”

Ken and Sandy carefully avoided meeting each other’s eyes as the man pulled a small red carton from his pocket, opened it, and lit a Gibraltar cigarette.

“It takes more than age to make a piece really valuable, you know,” he went on, flicking the match away. “It has to have inherent beauty, skilled craftsmanship, beautifully grained wood—But there I go riding my hobby again. If I thought you were really interested, I’d invite you to look over some of the things I’ve been buying, but—”

“We’d like to,” Ken said quickly. “Wouldn’t we, Sandy?”

“Sure.” Sandy got out of the car and joined them on the sidewalk.

“One of my father’s rules is ‘Never pass up an opportunity to learn something. It’s impossible for a reporter to know too much about anything.’” He grinned. “But don’t let us take your time, Mr. De Lacey, if there’s something else you ought to be doing now.”

“There’s never anything that seems more important to me than talking about pictures or furniture,” De Lacey assured them, as he led the way through the Temple gate and past the house toward the barn. “Besides, my car’s laid up this morning and I can’t start off on my rounds until it’s finished.”

The station wagon had disappeared when they entered the barn, and the overalled workman was busy arranging the load it had brought in some kind of order.

Along one wall stood a dozen or more large wooden crates, some already nailed shut, some still open. De Lacey saw the boys glance toward them.

“That’s how we ship the fragile things,” he explained, reaching toward the nearest open box and lifting out a paper—wrapped object. “A wooden bowl,” he said. “Cut from a solid piece of maple—beautifully shaped. And covered with the accumulated grime of a hundred years. One of my luckier finds, though not of course really valuable.”

He put the package back in the box and gestured toward a small chest of drawers. “That was a piece of luck too—found it in somebody’s barn.” His carefully manicured finger tapped the surface, and he smiled thoughtfully. “It’ll probably take a month to soak off these layers and layers of paint—and the cost of the labor will undoubtedly be more than I can get for the piece in the end. Bonnell—that’s my assistant—complains that we’ll never get rich, and I expect he’s right. But I can’t bear to use these quick paint removers on fine pieces.”

He walked toward the workman, now engaged in wrapping soft quilting around the grandfather’s clock the boys had seen in the station wagon, and introduced him as Wilbur Jones.

“Wilbur’s in charge of our refinishing shop in New York,” De Lacey explained, “but I persuade him to come along on all my buying trips because he’s the best packer I’ve ever known.”

The lean, middle-aged man grinned at the boys over his work. “When a thing’s been kicked around for a couple of hundred years in somebody’s house,” he said, “it doesn’t have to be packed so carefully as the boss thinks. Did you notice the name of the cabinetmaker carved inside this clock, Mr. De Lacey?” he went on. “Fellow by the name of Timber—Charles Timber. D’you suppose that’s why he took up woodworking?”

De Lacey and the boys smiled and moved close to inspect the

neatly carved name, and a moment later Ken said casually, "Speaking of names—have you run across a Driscoll around here? That's the man we're supposed to be seeing today, but we've come off without his address."

De Lacey looked thoughtful and shook his head. "I'm sure I haven't. Have you heard it, Wilbur?"

"No. Might ask Bonnell, though."

"That's a thought," De Lacey agreed. "Did he go off again? I thought he'd brought the whole load in that last trip."

"Just drove down to the diner for a cup of coffee."

"Oh. Well, I could ask him as soon as he comes back," De Lacey offered.

"It's not important, thanks," Ken said. "We've got to call the office, anyway." He looked around. "Have you filled the whole barn with your purchases—and the loft too?" He glanced toward a steep flight of stairs leading upward.

"Not quite. This is the lot." De Lacey gestured around the lower room. And then his eyes lit up. "But if you're at all interested in wood, you might like to go up there and take a look around. Some of the most remarkable hand—hewn timbers I've ever seen. Mrs. Temple tells me they came from an earlier structure."

Wilbur nodded. "Wish she'd sell us those—instead of trying to palm off her fumed oak dining—room chairs on you."

The boys voiced polite interest, and a few moments later found themselves alone in the huge empty loft. De Lacey had apologized for not accompanying them, on the grounds that the steep stairs were an effort at his age.

Ken strained his ears, while they were out of sight, for any significant exchanges between De Lacey and Wilbur, but he heard only commonplace remarks about the need for additional wrapping on the clock.

He and Sandy looked at each other and shrugged. And when they had descended the stairs again they spoke appreciatively of the huge beams and then left, thanking the antique dealer for having showed them around.

"There certainly wasn't anything else to thank him for," Sandy said dejectedly as they returned to the car. "If he's mixed up in something, he certainly doesn't leave clues lying around."

"And if Granger gives him a good report, I guess we'll have to write him off," Ken said. "Gibraltars notwithstanding. I'll go call Pop now."

When he came out of the post office he was walking quickly. "Pop says to come home. The letter from Joe arrived—the one mentioned in the wire last night. Pop says it sounds even crazier than the post

card.”

Sandy wasted no time, swinging the car in a tight circle. “And De Lacey?”

“Granger says he’s beyond suspicion—on the board of trustees of three museums. Internationally recognized expert on painting and furniture both. And Granger says to tell us that whatever we’ve got in mind, we’re on the wrong track if we think De Lacey’s mixed up in anything crooked.”

“We’ve met people before,” Sandy said, “who were supposed to be beyond suspicion, and who proved to be ...” He let his voice die away.

Ken grunted his agreement. “When Granger finds us someone else around here who smokes these foreign cigarettes, it’ll be easier to cross De Lacey off our list.” He looked at Sandy as he went on. “And anyway there’s something else. The letter from Joe was postmarked here yesterday!”

CHAPTER X

THE WARNING

Pop was talking on the telephone when the boys arrived at the end of their quick trip from Crandon. But as soon as he saw them he pointed urgently toward a sheet of paper on the corner of his desk.

Together the boys bent over it to read the few lines in Joe's handwriting:

Dear Pop:

This is to report my brother's satisfactory convalescence, at a rate that should permit me to return to Brentwood by Friday.

My conscience still bothers me mightily—much in the manner of Lady Macbeth's bloodstains. If I had only been able to finish pieing the type before I left! Should anyone wish to continue the work, it might help to know that I had reached the I and the N in the case of Caslon Old Style.

Sincerely, Joe

"I give up," Sandy said. "Lady Macbeth!"

"Lady Macbeth," Ken repeated, more quietly. "What was it she said? I know! 'Out, damned spot!'"

Pop had put down the phone in time to hear him.

"That's what she said, all right. But what does Joe's—"

"Couldn't he be trying to tell us that he wants to get out—out of wherever he is?" Ken's voice tensed in spite of his efforts to consider the letter calmly.

Pop rubbed a tired hand over his gray hair. "I don't know. It almost sounds as if Joe were trying to drive us crazy—or as if he'd gone crazy himself. Lady Macbeth. And more nonsense about pied type!"

"But it could all be a message," Ken insisted. "He wants to get out. And the reference to Caslon Old Style is some kind of hint as to where he is—if we were just smart enough to figure it out."

"The *Advance* uses plenty of Caslon Old Style—for ads and printing jobs," Sandy said, half to himself. "But he couldn't be referring to anything we'd ever printed in it—that covers too much territory."

He suddenly jumped off the desk where he'd perched himself. "Maybe he actually left a message for us in a case of type—somewhere near an I or an N!"

Pop shook his head. "We've got more than twenty cases of the stuff—from the six—point size for business cards, right up through the big display head sizes. But it all gets used pretty regularly. If there were a note stuck in a case somewhere, it probably would have been found already." He saw the look on the boys' faces and stood up. "All right,"

he said. "We can try."

They all walked together through the business and editorial office back into the printing shop, skirted the linotype machine, edged around the big press, and finally reached the rear wall lined with cabinets of type. Each size of type was stored in its own shallow drawer, or case, and each case was divided into many compartments. In these compartments were stored the lead type for each letter of the alphabet, numerals, punctuation marks, and other symbols.

"Here's all the Caslon Old Style," Pop said.

One by one they opened all the drawers and examined them, paying particular attention to the compartments holding the various sizes of the letters I and N. And one by one they slid the drawers shut. Each was in order. None contained a note, or any visible message.

Back in the front office again Ken began a restless pacing back and forth, while Pop and Sandy slumped at their desks.

"In the post card Joe didn't mention any specific kind of type," Ken said, thinking out loud. "He just said he hadn't finished pieing the type—and we thought maybe it was a message because it was such a crazy thing to say. But now he talks about pieing Caslon Old Style. Caslon Old Style," he repeated, as if saying the words over might force them to give up their secret.

Sandy had picked up the envelope in which the letter had come, and was pursuing his own line of thought.

"I don't suppose the postmaster would remember anything about this one. It was just the *time* of the post card—arriving as he was closing the mailbag—that—"

"Time!" Ken seized on the word as Sandy's voice trailed into silence, and he took the envelope from Sandy's hand. "Postmarked two o'clock yesterday afternoon. And we know the mail leaves at three."

Pop grunted assent. "But what are you driving at?"

"If we can figure out some kind of timetable of events, it might help," Ken said. "The point is, the letter was on its way when the telegram was sent last night. So why was the telegram sent?"

"But last night you convinced us that Joe didn't send the wire," Sandy pointed out.

"I know. I'm sure he didn't. But whoever did send it—we might as well call him X—*knew* about the letter. The wire said 'Letter follows'—remember? So what—last night—made that wire suddenly necessary? Why did X feel we needed quick reassurance—or threatening—right then?"

"If the wire had been sent this morning," Sandy said slowly, "I'd say it would clinch our original suspicions of the bird—watching gentleman who apparently"—he grinned briefly at Ken—"doesn't

know a pied typer from a canary. And whose chauffeur drives at such a terrific speed,” he added. “Ken told you that whole story, didn’t he, Pop?”

Pop nodded. “Over the phone. I’ll admit it sounds peculiar, but I don’t know what to make of it. I suppose the explanation of the wire is that you two did something *yesterday*—you may not even have been aware of it—that worried X to the point where he figured a little extra pressure was necessary. Maybe if you wrote down everything you did, you’d—” The phone drowned him out.

Pop picked it up, reaching automatically for a pencil at the same time. “Brentwood *Advance* ... Oh, Bert! ... You did?” He grinned briefly into the phone. “I told you not to drive in there.” He spoke over the mouthpiece to the boys. “Bert’s stuck out by the new refinery—all four wheels down to the hubs. Yes,” he went on to Bert, “I guess they could. They’re here now. Give me the dope.” He wrote rapidly for a few minutes before he said good—bye and hung up.

“Bert thinks that car of his is a Jeep,” Sandy said.

“He should know better after today.” Pop tore the top sheet off his scratch pad and handed it to Ken. “Sorry to interrupt this gabfest,” he said, “but I don’t know as it’s getting us anywhere. And unless you two can think of something definite to do about Joe right now, I’m afraid you’ll have to go out on this story. Bert was handling it—a 4—H show at Greenbrier Farm—but he’s obviously not going to get there now. How about it?”

“We might as well,” Ken said. “It doesn’t do Joe—or anybody—any good to sit here and talk about him. Is this the background stuff here?” He looked at the notes.

Pop nodded. “And bring back a couple of pictures,” he told Sandy.

During the half—hour it took the convertible to cover the distance to Greenbrier Farm, both Ken and Sandy maintained a thoughtful silence. But as Sandy was parking behind a long line of cars in the spacious yard of the farm, Ken roused himself.

“Those are the only two times it could have happened,” he said decisively.

“What are you talking about?” Sandy got out and took his press camera off the rear seat.

“I’ve been figuring out when we did whatever it was we did that alarmed Mr. X to the point of sending a telegram,” Ken explained, stuffing some extra flash bulbs into his coat pocket.

“You’re sounding about as mixed up as Joe’s letter,” Sandy pointed out, as they walked toward the barn where the show was being held. “Make sense, will you?”

“The letter we got today was mailed at Crandon not long after we were asking the postmaster there a lot of questions,” Ken said slowly.

"If the postmaster happened to notice it being mailed—and recognized the person mailing it as the same person who had mailed the post card— isn't it likely that he told him about our questions? He's a friendly, talkative old man. I think that's just what he'd do, under the circumstances."

Sandy thought it over. "But if he alarmed X, and X decided to send that telegram," he said finally, "why did he wait until evening to do it? Why didn't he send it then?"

"That had me stopped for a minute too," Ken admitted, "but I've figured out a possible explanation: the man who mailed the post card and the letter wasn't X himself. He was only a hired hand." He grinned briefly at Sandy. "The postmaster said he was big. Big men seldom have enough brains to be the boss."

"While you, on the other hand"—Sandy grinned back—"are small enough to be the brainy type. Yes, sir." He nodded. "You've certainly been proving it the last two days."

"Ouch! All right—I guess I had that coming." But Ken sobered immediately. "Seriously, if the man who did the mailing wasn't the boss, and if he wasn't able to report to the boss until later, that would account for the wire being sent in the evening."

Sandy reserved judgment. "You said something about two possibilities. What's the other?"

"That there was something phony about the railroad repair trucks and those white signal lights we saw. Maybe the trucks were stolen, or maybe they were just painted to look like repair trucks, and the men in them were planning some crime involving the railroad."

Sandy snorted. "Train robbery again?"

"Maybe," Ken said stubbornly. "Something, anyway. The point is that when we saw that truck last night the men driving it could have seen our car when they turned into the highway from that truck lane. And it doesn't require genius to note a license number and find out who owns the car, especially since there's our Press Sticker on the windshield."

Sandy figured silently. "The timing could be right," he agreed. "We were spotted—if we were—about seven thirty. The wire came about two hours later—which would have given X two hours to find out who we are and decide to send the wire." He stopped just outside the barn, from within which sounded a mixture of noises ranging from a baby's hungry cry to the mooing of a patient cow. "So where does that get us?"

"Nowhere, yet," Ken admitted. "But at least—"

"Hold it," Sandy interrupted him. "If the Crandon postmaster is as talkative as you say—and I'll agree he struck me the same way—wouldn't he have mentioned to you this morning that he had again

seen the man we asked him about?"

Ken ran a hand over his hair, in unconscious imitation of Pop in his thoughtful moods. "I guess you're right. If he had seen the man, he'd have told us. Nobody could have persuaded him to keep quiet—for a price, say. He just isn't the type."

Sandy nodded. "That's what I think. I just can't see him in the role of aiding and abetting a criminal—unless, of course, somebody suggested the thing to him as a joke." He started forward again. "Come on. Let's get this job done. We can do some checking on the railroad repair crew afterward."

Two hours later Sandy motioned Ken into the driver's seat. "I have to relax," he explained. "That 4—H crowd certainly knows how to make ice cream and cake."

"Poor Bert," Ken commented. "He missed a fine assignment." But a moment later his thoughts had returned to their problem. "You said Jim Caldwell at the railroad yard would give us the dope we want."

"Right. Pull up at the first phone."

By leaving the door ajar, they both managed to crowd into the phone booth at a highway service station, and Sandy held the earphone away from his ear so that Ken could hear too.

"This is Sandy Allen, Jim. Is it all right for you to give out information about your repair crews?"

"What kind of information, Sandy? What's up?"

"Nothing, probably. Ken and I are just having a little argument about whether or not we saw one of your crews working on the signal bridge in the marsh just outside of town."

Caldwell laughed. "Don't you have anything better to argue about? All right—wait a minute. I'll check the assignment book."

A moment later he was back on the line. "Well, one of you is right. A report came in here yesterday that the signal at the western end of the marsh was acting up, and we had a crew out there last night making a quick check. Nothing seemed to be wrong, but we sent a second crew out in daylight, today, to give the lights a good going over. That what you want?"

"Exactly. I win," Sandy said. "Thanks a lot."

"Well, congratulate yourself for me, and get your minds back on the newspaper business." Caldwell laughed and hung up.

"Satisfied?" Sandy asked, as they extricated themselves from the booth. "Ready to give up your train—robbery theory?"

"I guess so."

They walked outside and across to the car, Ken going around the rear end to reach the driver's seat. He heard Sandy's exclamation just as he put his hand on the door.

The redhead was pointing to a scrap of paper lying on the leather

upholstery. On it, in neatly printed letters, was a brief message:
if you're really concerned about Driscoll, stop snooping!

CHAPTER XI

TRAILED

Ken read the message again. "Looks like the gloves are coming off," he muttered.

Then he swung around to scan the highway in both directions. There wasn't a car in sight. Near the gas pumps the attendant was refilling the water bucket in a leisurely fashion. Ken was at his side in a few swift strides.

"Was anybody near our car while we were inside using the phone?" he asked.

"Why? Something missing?" The man's tone implied that he took Ken's question as an accusation.

"No," Ken told him. "But we found a note on the seat when we came out, and we wondered if you saw somebody leave it there."

The man wiped his hands on a piece of waste. "Nope. I got more important things to do. Don't it say who it's from?" He turned away again, disinterested.

"Not exactly," Ken told him. He moved around so that he could see the attendant's face again. "Didn't any cars stop here at all while we were inside?"

"Couple of men stopped to ask directions."

"Do you remember what they looked like?"

"Look, buster," the man said shortly, "I don't get paid for taking stock of everybody who stops here. No, I don't remember what they looked like. I guess they had two arms, two legs, and one head each, like anybody else. They stopped and one of 'em came over here where I was minding my own business." He paused, as if to let the last phrase sink in for a moment—as if to suggest that Ken's departure would permit him to return to that happy state of affairs. "I told him what he wanted to know—how to get to Brentwood—and he went back to his car and they took off."

"What kind of car?" Ken asked, standing his ground. "A big seven—passenger sedan?"

"Seein' as how they were parked back by your car, it was kind of covered up. And I'm not paid to notice," he repeated.

"O.K.," Ken said. "And thanks—very much." He turned and went back to the convertible.

Sandy had overheard the conversation. "It was certainly easy," he commented. "They park right beside us, and one of them drops the note off as he walks past."

Ken nodded. He slid behind the wheel, started the motor, and

guided the car out into the highway. "But now we've got a piece of evidence that Andy Kane'll have to pay attention to."

"We've certainly got evidence that somebody's been following us." Sandy's voice was grim and worried. "And if we head straight for the police station—" He shook his head. "I don't think our note—writing friends would like that. And if we've already put Joe in danger ..."

"We can telephone Andy," Ken pointed out. "We don't have to go there. Then Andy can—" He stopped.

"That's it," Sandy agreed soberly. "What *can* Andy do? Send out a general alarm? Ask the state police to go tearing up and down the roads inquiring for a black sedan? If our friends notice even *our* small—scale snooping, they would certainly get wind of that in a hurry."

Ken drove silently for a mile, his hands tense on the wheel. "We must be overlooking something," he said angrily then. "If Mr. X thinks we're dangerous, he must think we're pretty close to something. But what?"

Sandy slumped in the seat. "We've already been over it a hundred times: Joe's house, Crandon, the marsh—"

The car swerved suddenly under Ken's jerking hands. He righted it before he spoke. "I've got it! I knew there was something!" He gave the horn a triumphant jab and passed a slow—moving farmer's truck. "Look," he continued, "when we were in the marsh last night—when we saw the white lights blinking—we saw the signal light change from green to red, didn't we?"

Sandy nodded. "Sure. And the train stopped. And what's so wonderful about remembering that? **You** almost drove us off the road."

Ken ignored his last words. "And then the signal changed back to green. Didn't it?"

"So what?"

"Signals don't work that way!" Ken retorted. "I half noticed at the time that something was wrong, but—"

Sandy's eyebrows had lifted skeptically. "Suddenly you're a railroad expert?"

"You don't have to be an expert to know that. Railroad tracks are divided into sections—what they call signal blocks. And when a train is in any one block, the signal light behind it is red to stop any other train from entering that same block."

Sandy nodded. "You're right. I'm no expert, but even I know that."

"When the train moves on to the next block," Ken went on firmly, "the next signal turns red. And the signal that *was* red turns to yellow—caution. And *then* it turns green. And the same thing happens in reverse: green, yellow, red. But we saw a green signal followed immediately by red!" Ken swung off the highway with a flourish and

slowed down for the Brentwood city limits. “How do you explain that?”

Sandy’s voice betrayed his interest, but he said with an effort at casualness, “Probably there was a train backing up—one on the same track.”

“The signal would still turn first to yellow and then to red.”

“I guess you’re right. And the red light we saw turned straight to green too!” Sandy was sitting upright now.

“Right!”

But Sandy leaned suddenly back against the seat again. “I just remembered,” he said flatly. “It doesn’t mean anything after all. Those repairmen we saw at work this morning—they were doing something inside that cabinet at the foot of the signal bridge. And the signals changed from green to red. If there was a crew there last night too—as we know now there was—they were probably doing the same thing, operating the signals by hand, to test them.”

Ken brought the car to a halt in the *Advance* parking lot, and reached automatically to help Sandy with his camera equipment.

They walked to the back door of the office in silence.

“All right,” Ken said then. “I guess you win.”

And then, with his hand on the knob, he stopped abruptly.

“Now what?” Sandy asked.

“Listen,” Ken said grimly. “We don’t know what time the repair crew was down at the marsh last night. Do we?”

Sandy shook his head sadly. “Here we go again.”

Ken waved the skepticism aside. “Suppose what we saw last night *wasn’t* the railroad crew. Suppose it was somebody else fooling around with the lights—somebody who had no business there.”

“Why? What would be the point?”

“Before you can hold up a train, you have to stop it,” Ken said.

“And what would be a better way to stop it than by turning the signal light red?”

“We know there was a railroad crew there last night,” Sandy said, after he had looked curiously at Ken for a long moment. “But because you’re determined to fit a train robbery somewhere into this picture, you decide there was somebody else there too. Or have I,” he added politely, “misunderstood your rather complicated reasoning process?”

“You’ve understood it all right,” Ken assured him impatiently.

“And it makes sense too.” He put a hand on Sandy’s arm. “Look. Somebody—not a repair crew—changed the lights from red to green. The engineer of that train we saw got curious about it. He turned in a report at the next stop. And *then* the repair crew was sent out.”

Sandy continued to look at him.

“Well?” Ken demanded. “Doesn’t it make sense?”

Sandy gave his head a shake. "The trouble with your wacky ideas," he said finally, "is that they're just logical enough to make it necessary to check them." He went on through the door, ahead of Ken. "O.K.," he said, over his shoulder, "I'll call Jim again."

He set his equipment down in a corner of the momentarily empty office, and headed for a phone.

Five minutes later they were back in the car again, driving as rapidly as the law allowed to the railroad yards.

Sandy swung around a corner fast enough to make the tires squeal. "If he'd already left his office when we called," he muttered, "there isn't much chance of catching him in the yard. But I suppose we've got to try."

Ken smiled briefly to himself. Sandy had been more impressed with his "complicated reasoning" than he had admitted.

The redhead drove the car inside the railroad yard and pulled to a quick stop near the exit of the parking lot. He looked hastily over the rows of cars and then shook his head. "I don't see Jim's."

Ken nudged him. "Here comes somebody. Ask him."

The railroad worker's brow furrowed over their question. "Jim Caldwell? Seems to me I saw him drive out through the gate just a minute ago. Might have been somebody else, though."

"Thanks." Sandy started forward and Ken followed. "Might as well ask around inside, now that we're here. Maybe somebody else can give us the information."

But a few moments later they were driving back toward the office. The man they had spoken to had politely but firmly refused them any information unless they brought him authority from Caldwell, his supervisor.

From behind the wheel Sandy flashed Ken a grin. "Don't worry," he said. "This isn't a fatal setback. Jim lives about twenty miles out of town—he'll be home in half an hour. We can get him by phone then, and maybe he'll call the office and get us the facts."

He pulled out into the center lane, waiting for a chance to make the left turn off the highway. Automatically his eyes glanced into the rear—view mirror, and then swung back. He had focused ahead again before he realized what he had seen. His left arm pulled up the emergency brake at the same moment that he said hoarsely, "The sedan—two cars behind us!"

Before Ken could react, Sandy had his door open and was running back across the thirty feet that separated them from the vehicle they had lost sight of that morning. Ken leaped out to follow.

Sandy had covered only half the distance when the sedan's horn blasted, and the heavy car pulled back into the right lane directly in front of an oncoming truck. The alert truck driver swerved toward the

curb barely in time to avoid a crack—up.

Ken backed up close to the convertible as the big car shot past him, its engine roaring.

While Ken was still climbing in, the convertible lurched and took off. Sandy had thrown himself behind the wheel and released the brake in a single motion.

But a block later Sandy slowed down. Once more the sedan was out of sight.

“Good try,” Ken said. He took a deep breath and latched the door on his side of the car. He had been holding it closed up until then.

“Not good enough. I’d like to get my hands on that fake bird watcher—or that chauffeur,” Sandy muttered. He made a left turn and drove with one eye on the rear—view mirror.

Ken twisted in the seat so that he could see through the back window. “There’s nobody suspicious—looking behind us now,” he reported after they’d gone several blocks.

Sandy grunted and turned a corner, drove rapidly for a block and then turned once more, pulling up at the curb some fifty feet from the corner. The three cars that had been behind them passed the intersection without making the turn.

“O.K.” Sandy sounded at least partially convinced that they were no longer being followed. “I guess they can’t take too many chances in daylight.”

“But it’s not going to stay daylight very long,” Ken reminded him. “Let’s get back to the office.”

They parked behind the office as usual, but instead of entering the building by the rear door they walked out to the street, through the alley, and made another quick check of the cars parked in their block. The sedan was not there.

Pop had seen them through the front windows.

“What’s up?” he asked, as they came in.

“Plenty,” Sandy said. “We’ve received a warning—somebody’s been following us.”

“Warning!” Pop stood up so fast that his chair banged into the wall behind him. “What kind of warning?”

Ken held out the note. “Found this on the seat of—”

The phone interrupted him. Pop turned and scooped up the instrument. “Brentwood *Advance*” he barked. “Allen speaking.” Then suddenly he was motioning to them to pick up the extension. “I didn’t get you,” he said into the mouthpiece, as the boys leaped toward a desk and Ken lifted a phone. “Would you repeat that?”

The voice was flat and quiet, but it had a menacing undertone that was unmistakable.

“I’m calling for Joe Driscoll,” it said. “He’s glad the two snoops got

back safely. They may not be so lucky next time—and neither will he. One word to the wise is usually sufficient. You’ve already had several.”

There was a momentary silence, and then a faint click.

All they could hear was the humming of the empty circuit.

CHAPTER XII

THE CLUE IS CLARIFIED

pop set the phone down very gently and looked at the boys over the bowl of his pipe. "I guess you've been followed all right," he said.

"But we thought we'd lost 'em before we got back here, Pop," Ken said, cradling the extension. "We were sure we had." He shook his head. "Guess they had two cars trailing us—and we didn't spot the second. Or else they knew where we'd come, and just sat here waiting."

Sandy was already peering through the front window, studying the cars and the passers—by.

"Do you expect them to be wearing a sign?" Pop snapped at him. "Come over here. Ken, show me that note—and then we'll get Andy on the phone."

Ken and Sandy exchanged glances as Pop's mouth tightened over the brief printed message, and when Pop reached for the telephone Ken spoke.

"Wait a minute, Pop. We've talked about that—what'll happen if Andy really goes to work on this. And we figure all he can do is send out an alarm for a seven—passenger sedan, license unknown. Driver wears chauffeur's cap and dark glasses—or did this morning. Passenger—if any—may be short and plump. What good is it going to do? And what'll happen to Joe if—?"

"Yes. I see." Pop's hand came slowly away from the phone.

"And if my hunch is right that—" Ken broke off to turn toward Sandy. "Would Caldwell be at home yet?"

While Sandy looked up the number and put the call through, Ken explained his theory to Pop.

Pop Allen frowned. "The idea of holding up a train doesn't sound very logical," he said when Ken had finished. "But on the other hand logic seems pretty generally absent in this whole situation. Maybe—"

"No luck," Sandy reported, putting down the phone. "Mrs. Caldwell says this is Jim's bowling night. He has supper in a restaurant and then goes right to the alleys. No, she doesn't know which restaurant," he added, forestalling Ken's question. "Yes, I have the name of the bowling alley. We can reach him there about eight."

Ken glanced at his watch. "Almost three hours," he muttered. "And then—"

"Exactly," Pop barked. "And then—what? You're afraid of what might happen to Joe if we get the police prowling around on this thing. And yet you're willing to risk Joe's neck by letting Caldwell in

on it!"

"But how else can we learn whether the men there last night were legitimate railroad employees?" Ken asked.

"And suppose they weren't?" Pop demanded. "If your hunch is right, and Caldwell gets wind of it, do you suppose his chief concern is going to be Joe? It certainly isn't! He's going to crowd that marsh so full of railroad police that—"

He broke off as the door opened and Bert came in.

"The next time my car gets stuck in the mud in the line of duty," Bert announced, "I shall expect reimbursement from the *Advance* petty cash drawer."

"Never mind your car," Pop told him brusquely. "Sit down and listen."

With the brevity of a skilled newspaperman, Pop brought Bert up to date in a minimum of time and words.

"So what's the plan of action?" Bert asked, when he had finished. Bert had followed his father's account with concentrated attention, but now he looked at Ken and Sandy too. "If Joe is being held until some crime—whatever it is—is committed, I'd be inclined to let them get away with it, as fast as possible, for Joe's sake. The police can worry about picking up the criminals later."

"But how can we be sure that will rescue Joe?" Pop asked quietly. "Suppose Joe can identify Mr. X. Do you think he'll *ever* be released?"

The words hung ominously in the quiet dusky office.

Outside the wide front window, men and women moved past, heads bent a little in the face of a brisk spring breeze. Cars edged slowly toward the intersection. But the normal traffic noises were cut off by the heavy plate glass, and that same invisible barrier seemed to isolate the four in the *Advance* office from all the busy cheerfulness of everyday life.

"*Do you think he'll ever be released?*" The words echoed over and over again in the silence.

Suddenly Sandy reached up and jerked on a light.

"We've got to *do* something!" he said, as the harsh yellow glare illuminated the little group around Pop's desk, and threw the rest of the office into sharper shadow.

And then Sandy cast a quick look over his shoulder, and instinctively reached toward the light cord again, as if regretting the act that had made the *Advance* office a brilliantly lit stage for the now formless figures outside.

"Leave it on," Pop told him. "They know you're in here. And they won't make any trouble as long as they think *you're* not making trouble. That's why Bert and I are taking over now," he added.

Three pairs of eyes looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"I don't get it," Sandy said.

Pop flattened a big hand on the desk. "I've got it all thought out. You two"—he nodded at Ken and Sandy—"will go home to supper, as usual, and after supper you'll drive toward the marsh. You'll wait until you're sure which car is following you, and then you'll dodge around corners as if you're trying to lose it—but you won't succeed."

"That ought to be easy—for them," Bert commented.

Nobody rose to Bert's taunt, and Bert himself muttered an apologetic "Sorry" as his father went on.

"Then," Pop said, "you drive back to town—still being followed, you understand—and go to the movies."

"To the movies!" Ken repeated blankly. "What—?"

"They'll think it's a trick," Pop said firmly, "and they'll stick close. But you'll be safe in the movies—and you'll stay there until nine thirty at least."

"And in the meantime?" Bert prompted. "You said you and I were taking over."

"We are. We give the boys a fifteen—minute start tonight, and then we head for Joe's place. We'll walk the last half mile, come up through the woods, and make for the marsh. We'll find a good place there—and we'll wait." He looked at Bert and smiled. "I haven't lost the use of my fists, even if I am a little rusty lately. If anybody turns up in that marsh tonight, I think you and I can persuade him to talk. And once we find out where Joe is, we'll get hold of Andy on the double—quick and let him move in."

There was silence for a moment when he had finished.

"And if nothing happens at the marsh tonight?" Ken asked.

Pop shrugged. "We'll worry about that if we have to. In the meantime, of course," he added, with deceptive modesty, "if anybody has any better ideas—?"

"I don't like this business of us just sitting around in a movie!" Sandy burst out. "Why can't we—?"

"You'll look at a movie and like it," his father told him. "This is no time for heroics. We need all the brains and common sense we've got." He stood up. "And it's time to start for home now and get this program under way."

"What do we do at nine thirty?" Ken asked.

"You go back home and stay there. We'll get word to you."

"A fine thing," Sandy muttered, as they all headed for the back door a few minutes later. "Decoys!"

"Better a decoy than a dead pigeon." Bert grinned.

It was just seven o'clock when Ken and Sandy stepped out on the back porch of the Allen house. They'd made sure that the porch light was on, so that they were identifiable by anyone in the vicinity.

“Not too fast,” Ken cautioned, as Sandy backed out of the driveway and into the street. He checked the parked cars in the block and shook his head. “Nobody we’re looking for,” he reported.

Sandy drove around the corner and braked gently on the hill to check the car’s momentum.

“Nobody after us yet,” Ken said, his eyes on the rear window.

“They’re not going to send up flares,” Sandy pointed out. “So keep a sharp eye out.”

He drove through town, still at an easy pace, and on the far side let the car pick up a little speed as he headed for the highway.

“Four cars behind us,” Ken reported. And when Sandy turned off at the next intersection, he added, “Lost two of them there. Two left ... Now it’s only one. The other car turned off into that driveway.”

Sandy blew the horn at a pair of headlights at the next crossroads, and went past.

“Lost our last car there—but picked up the one you blew at,” Ken told him.

Sandy cut left at the next block, then right and then right once more. At the next corner he slowed down.

“Still one,” Ken said. “But I can’t be sure it’s the same car.”

“It isn’t,” Sandy grunted. “He’s here—waiting for us.”

Ken swung around in time to see the nose of the small coupe they were crossing in front of. “He’s turned after us,” he said a moment later.

“Good.” Sandy headed for the highway, turned into it at a break in the traffic, and stepped down hard. The red convertible jumped ahead.

“Easy,” Ken warned. “He’s been held up by the light.”

Sandy eased his right foot up a little.

“O.K. Here he comes.”

“Now we’ll see what happens if we try to shake him,” Sandy said.

He pulled off the road as if heading for a gas station up another few hundred feet. Then, just as the coupe drew past, he swung around in a hard circle, waited for a chance to cut across into the eastbound lane, and headed back toward Brentwood. “Where is he?”

Ken caught his breath. “Wow! That was close. He made a U—turn right in front of a truck. Here he comes!”

Sandy swung into the left lane and put out his hand for a left turn.

The coupe passed by on the right, its stop lights flashing as its driver checked speed. Sandy swung across and into a street heading back toward the center of town.

“Still with us?”

“No.” Ken kept looking back. “Maybe we were wrong about him, after all.”

“I don’t think so. I think he’s just smart.” Sandy stepped hard on

the gas. "See? He took the next street—he's waiting for us. This is silly. We could get him in a corner and jump out and grab him before he could make a move."

"No," Ken said. "Let's play it Pop's way. And, anyway, what would be our complaint against him? There's nothing illegal about following us—if we're sure he is."

"There's nothing illegal about being in that marsh, either," Sandy retorted. "But Pop and Bert expect to grab somebody there."

"They'll grab him when he's doing something to the railroad." Ken looked around again. "Still there. Think it's about time we head for the movies?"

"I guess so." Sandy drove directly to the theater without any further evasive tactics, and groaned when he parked a few doors from the marquee. "On top of everything else, this is a picture we've already seen!"

Ken urged him unsympathetically out of the car. "Come on. Our friend has parked across the street. It's our job to keep him here—and keep him worried."

"Hi, Sandy—Ken." The usher had been an *Advance* newsboy a few years before. "How far down front?"

Ken strained his eyes in the darkness and made out two vacant seats on the aisle in the back row. "Right here, Jackie. And look—if someone calls for us, don't forget where we are."

"Sure thing."

"Pop might page us if anything breaks," Ken muttered as they slid into the seats and looked toward the screen, where a cartoon was coming to a finish.

A newsreel followed the cartoon, and when that ended a travelogue began.

"A trip through Old England," Sandy said, between clenched teeth. "This'll be exciting!" He turned to look at the clock left of the stage.

"Only seven fifty—five."

"Quiet," Ken told him.

"One of the ageless features of England," the voice from behind the screen was droning, "is its innumerable inns and hostelries. Nowhere have the qualities of the old style inn been so carefully preserved. And nowhere does the visitor ..."

"I'll go to sleep if he doesn't—"

"Quiet!" Ken's voice cut so sharply across Sandy's whisper that the redhead turned to stare at him. "What did he say?" Ken demanded.

"Huh? What did—?"

Ken silenced him with a tight grip on his arm.

"Here, in this fifteenth-century hostel," the voice was saying, "all that was good in the old style inn has been kept intact, with its flavor

of charm and quaintness. Here ...”

“Get out!” Ken was prodding Sandy out of his seat. “Now! Come on! Quick!”

Heads in front turned around. A dozen voices said “Shhh!”

Sandy stumbled out into the aisle. “What’s eating you?” he demanded, when they were behind the glass—topped partition backing the seats.

“Old style,” Ken said. “What did Joe write in that letter? That he’d gotten as far as the Caslon Old Style I and N. Couldn’t he have meant he’s being held at an old inn—an old style inn? Is there a place called that somewhere near here?”

Sandy stared at him. “Not that I know of.”

“You’re sure there’s not a place known as the old inn? Think!” Ken shook him by the arm.

“I never heard any name like that.”

“Never mind the name then. Is there an old inn—any old inn—somewhere near by? Or near Crandon maybe?”

“Crandon!” Sandy’s face suddenly blazed with excitement. “Sure! There’s the ruins of an old inn about three miles from there. It’s called Hangman’s Inn, I think—because in colonial times the hangman used to stop there overnight on his way to executions at—”

“Never mind the history,” Ken cut in. “Could it be used as a hide—out?”

“It’s a natural! There isn’t much left except the cellars and a couple of stone walls. But it’s way off the road and nobody’d ever notice if—”

Once more Ken cut him off. “Come on,” he said, turning toward the door. “We can be there in half an hour.”

CHAPTER XIII

SNARED

sandy grabbed him before Ken was through the swinging door. “You mean we’re just going to rush up to this old ruins by ourselves and—?”

“Of course not,” Ken said briskly. “We’re not that dumb. We’ll pick up Pop and Bert. We ought to be able to find them, I think. Come on.”

They went through the door together and paused for an instant under the marquee, both of them looking instinctively toward the coupe still parked across the street.

“Now we’ll really have to lose our tail,” Sandy muttered.

“We’ll manage. We—”

“You’re Ken Holt, aren’t you? And Sandy Allen?”

They swung around swiftly toward the man that had just spoken. The stranger who stood smiling at them was of medium height, unobtrusively dressed. The only unusual thing about him was the

small gold badge lying in the palm of his outthrust hand.

"Didn't mean to startle you," he murmured. "My credentials." He offered the badge for their inspection.

Ken looked at it carefully, and at the wallet the man drew from a pocket and flipped open before them. "Railroad police," Ken said.

"That's right. Tinker's the name." He put away the wallet and the badge. "There's been some strange goings on along our right of way through the marsh, just out of town here. Picked up a couple of characters there tonight, and thought maybe you could give us some help with them. Understand you've been asking questions at the railroad yard."

"Yes," Sandy said. "You see, we—"

"Good," Tinker interrupted. "Would you mind coming over to the yard with me? No use having you go over the whole thing twice. Think you could help us with identifications?"

"Sure, we'll come," Sandy said. "But the men you've picked up may not be the same ones we—"

"Good," Tinker interrupted again, in his polite colorless voice. "So long as you don't mind giving us a hand. Have you got a car here?" he added. "I came in a cab."

"Ours is the red convertible—right there."

"Fine." Tinker started toward it.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Tinker," Ken said quietly. "I think you ought to know that somebody's been following us—and we think they're tied in with what's been going on at the marsh."

"Oh?" Tinker eyed him sharply. "Somebody followed you here?"

Ken nodded. "That small coupe across the street and four—no, five—cars down."

Tinker glanced toward it under the shadowing brim of his hat.

"Hmm," he murmured. He was thoughtful for a moment. "Let's carry on," he said then. "I don't have any authority to make arrests here, anyway, but if they follow you right onto railroad property, I'll be on my home ground."

He gestured Ken into the driver's seat. "I'll sit up front, if you don't mind," he added to Sandy.

The redhead slipped into the back seat and turned so that he could watch through the rear window. "Coupe's coming right along," he reported when Ken had turned the first corner.

"Good." Tinker nodded. "Turn left here."

"I guess you mean right," Ken said. "That's—"

"I said *left*." The voice was still polite, but there was an undertone of steel in it. "Am I going to have trouble convincing you?" it added.

Ken glanced toward him. But his eyes never reached the man's face. They stopped dead on the small automatic glinting faintly in the

light from the dashboard.

Its nose was pointed directly at Ken's stomach.

"Do we turn left?" Tinker asked.

Ken swung the wheel.

For a long moment the silence within the car was heavy. Ken gripped the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles were white, and he kept his eyes straight ahead. But he didn't have to look into the rear-view mirror to know that Sandy had leaned forward enough to see the gun. He heard the swift intake of breath that signaled Sandy's shock, and could almost feel the redhead's big body tensing for action.

But Tinker's senses were as alert as his own. The man's head swiveled slightly toward the back seat, and the gun swung too, until it was aimed at Sandy's head.

"Take it easy," he said, lifting the gun a little higher so that Ken could see clearly where it was pointed. "Turn right when you get to the highway," he told him. "And don't get any cute ideas about driving off the road or anything. That's my buddy in the car behind us—if I need any help, which I don't think I will."

The menacing words took on an extra chill from his colorless tone.

Ken slowed to a stop when he reached the highway, and then swung onto the broad strip of concrete.

When he finally spoke, his voice was almost as smooth and even as Tinker's. "What's this all about?"

He knew the effort it cost Sandy to pick up the question with equal calm. "That's what I'd like to know. If this is some kind of kidnapping scheme you might as well know we won't be worth much ransom."

Tinker's thin mouth lifted in a brief smile. "That may be true. But you have a certain nuisance value—a considerable amount of nuisance value, as a matter of fact." He laughed in appreciation of his own joke.

"I don't get it," Ken said. "Are you sure you haven't mistaken us for someone else?" And when Tinker answered that with scornful silence, he persisted, "To whom are we a nuisance?"

"Look," Tinker said, almost casually, "the less you know, the better off you'll be. Take my word for it. Behave yourselves, do what I tell you—and everything's going to be all right."

They were passing Joe's lane as he spoke. Opposite, somewhere in the marsh, Pop and Bert were concealed—out of sight but almost within call, Ken thought to himself.

He looked sidewise at Tinker, calculating his chances of twisting the wheel suddenly—of throwing the man enough off balance to swerve the ominous short barrel of his automatic away from Sandy's head.

"You're not getting any ideas, are you?" Tinker's voice, interpreting his thoughts, was almost mocking.

His body seemed comfortably relaxed in the seat, but his gun hand was firmly steady. And another brief glance told Ken that the man had braced himself with his feet and his free hand in such a way that it would take more than a lurch of the car to unsettle him.

"I've got a lot of ideas." Ken made himself speak slowly. "But they don't add up to anything—yet," he added, hoping that Sandy would read into the last word the warning he intended. "And I'd still like to know what this is all about. How'd you know we'd bite on that railroad—detective gag, for example?"

"We're smart operators." Tinker smiled. "We don't take chances. We check and double check."

The pride in the man's words gave Ken a faint hope. If they could get him to bragging—

And then Sandy spoke, and Ken knew that the redhead was all right—that he wasn't contemplating an impulsive action that could have only disastrous results.

"I was wondering about that too," Sandy said, almost as nonchalantly as if he weren't staring into the barrel of a gun. "Could you really be sure we'd fall for that gag? And if we hadn't—"

"We were sure, all right," Tinker cut in. "I told you we didn't take chances. Of course we knew the trick would work—with a couple of kids like you who love to play cops and robbers." Again he laughed.

In the mirror Ken saw Sandy lean forward, edging his hands over the back of the front seat.

"We notice all sorts of little things," Tinker went on. "Like this, for instance."

The gun darted forward and back, as swiftly as an adder's tongue. And as Sandy jerked, one hand clasping the stung knuckles of the other, Ken winced as if it had been his own hand that Tinker had struck.

He scarcely heard Tinker's laugh that time. "You hurt?" Ken asked.

"I'm O.K.," Sandy told him.

"That was just to clarify my point," Tinker explained.

Behind them the coupe winked its headlights.

"We've had enough conversation," Tinker said then. "Get this heap moving."

They were well out in the country now, with nothing to relieve the darkness but the occasional headlights of passing cars and trucks. Reluctantly Ken increased his speed from thirty to forty miles an hour.

A moment later the pair of lights behind them blinked once more, and the coupe's horn blared.

"Come on," Tinker said. "Get a move on."

Ken added another five miles to their speed, watching the coupe drop momentarily behind as the convertible surged ahead. But almost

immediately the coupe was once more riding close on their rear bumper.

It was Tinker who eventually broke the silence.

"We've been getting quite a kick out of watching you two play games," he said. "Doing your bird—watching act. Snooping around at the railroad yard. But we couldn't waste time amusing ourselves forever, so the boss appointed me to the railroad police force. Temporarily, of course," he added, and again laughed at the humor he seemed to find in his own words.

Ken had imperceptibly reduced their speed, until they were again traveling at a slow forty miles an hour. He still had no plan in mind, but it seemed obvious that their chances of escape were better on the road than they might be at whatever destination they were heading for.

But if Tinker hadn't noticed the lowered speed, the man in the car behind did. He blinked his lights and blasted the horn several times, angrily.

"Do I have to give your pal in the back seat another treatment?" Tinker asked. "Or will you keep this car moving without that?"

Obediently Ken stepped down on the accelerator.

"He can't go much faster than this," Sandy said suddenly. "Our front brake grabs, and if he has to stop short, the car'll go right over. Probably break all three of our necks, though frankly it's only two of them I'm worried about." And with a deliberate air of mockery Sandy laughed at his own joke.

But if he had hoped to anger Tinker—to disturb his air of calm—he was disappointed.

"You're not going to have to stop for quite a while," Tinker said evenly. "So step on it!"

"O.K. Have it your way," Ken said aloud, stepping down on the accelerator. "But just the other day we were coming through here and a car cut out on us. We jammed on the brakes and the car pulled so hard to the right that—"

"Cut out the chatter!" Tinker glanced at the speedometer. "Just keep her at fifty and shut up."

Sandy spoke from the shadows of the rear seat as if he hadn't heard Tinker's command. "You're wrong, Ken. That car the other day came out of County Line Road, and we were yanked so hard to the left that we swung into County Line Road before we could get the car under control."

No one but Ken could have noticed the faint emphasis he put on the word *left*.

"Guess you're right," Ken said. "Trouble was I was worrying about the truck behind us, and not paying enough attention to the

crossroads coming up.”

“This is the last time I’ll tell you,” Tinker said. “Cut out the chatter.”

Behind them the coupe kept pace, maintaining a twenty—five foot distance between the two cars.

“Wish he’d dim his lights,” Ken muttered. “He’s blinding me.”

“Take it easy,” Sandy cautioned. “That bad corner comes up in about half a mile.” He leaned forward slightly, but this time his hands were out of sight and Tinker contented himself with a warning glance which Sandy ignored.

“Thought it was somewhere around here,” Ken said.

Suddenly he stepped down hard on the accelerator and the car jumped forward. Before the coupe could increase its own speed, the gap between the cars had trebled and the crossroad warning sign flashed by.

“Look out!” Sandy shouted, as Tinker opened his mouth to speak. “Car coming!”

Instinctively Tinker peered ahead. And at that instant Ken slammed on the brakes, locking the wheels for a split second.

It was long enough.

Tinker lurched against the windshield. And before he could straighten, Sandy’s left hand flashed over the back of the seat and down. The edge of it struck the gun hand at the wrist and the weapon flew upward and out through the open window.

Already Ken was swinging sharply to the left, into the narrower County Line Road, tires screaming against concrete as they clawed for a hold. The convertible bucked and bounced as it fought the momentum—the right front wheel hit the gravel shoulder and the car sagged sickeningly toward the ditch.

Ken jammed his foot to the floor and the engine roared in immediate response, the churning rear wheels forcing the car back on the pavement. It shot across the narrow road heading for the left ditch, responded to Ken’s frantic tug on the wheel, and straightened out.

The desperate lurching from one side to the other had kept Tinker rocking back and forth.

Just as Ken got the car under control, Sandy struck. His left hand, doubled this time into a fist, connected with the man’s jaw.

Tinker’s head snapped up, caromed off the corner post in time to meet the fist a second time.

He slumped like a sack of meal onto the floor.

CHAPTER XIV

THE OLD INN

Sweat glistened on Ken's face and his hands were slippery on the wheel. The convertible was swaying on the uneven road as its speedometer climbed to fifty—to sixty—to sixty—five miles an hour.

Behind them, the coupe had managed to make the turn without crashing, and although it was some three hundred feet behind, it was maintaining the speed they were setting.

Ken risked a glance up into the mirror and pushed the accelerator to the floor. "I think we can lose him," he muttered.

"Take it easy," Sandy said grimly. "We'll take off if you go any faster." He turned and looked rearward. The coupe was still keeping up.

Its headlights blinked rapidly on and off several times. Its horn blared.

"Stop or else," Ken interpreted the signal. "We'll take the *or else*."

"Got a better way." Sandy leaned forward over the seat. "Up ahead about a mile there's a road to our right —gravel road. Dust cloud ought to slow him down."

Ken grunted his approval. "Hang on to Tinker when I make the turn."

"Check," Sandy said.

An instant later the warning sign loomed up on the right and rushed toward them at seventy miles an hour.

Ken took a last look in the mirror, swung out to the left side of the narrow road, and jammed his brake down.

The three hundred feet between them and the car behind began to dissolve like magic as the coupe bore down with unabated speed. Ken fought the bucking wheel, pulled hard to the right unmindful of the screaming tires. He felt the front wheels strike loose gravel and plow through sideways like a road scraper. The car swung dizzily, its hind end swinging like the tip of a snapped whip.

Ken spun the wheel to the left and gunned the engine. The churning rear tires threw a spray of loose stone rearward. The radiator pointed ahead once more.

Behind them a thick cloud of dust billowed out over the road, transforming the brilliant headlights of the coupe into a hazy patch of light that grew dimmer with each foot of gravel the convertible passed over.

In a matter of seconds all signs of pursuit had vanished, swallowed in the choking dust screen behind.

Sandy let his pent—up breath out in a sigh of relief. “He can’t do much chasing until the dust settles a little,” he said. “Should give us plenty of head start.”

He peered ahead. “The next crossroad will take us back to the highway.”

Ken nodded. Fighting the bumps that threatened to throw the car off the road took his attention and his strength. Stones clanked against the undercarriage and thumped hollowly against the fenders. The rear wheels bounced like rubber balls on the ragged roadbed.

Sandy leaned way forward and pulled the unconscious man back up on the seat, holding the limp shoulders firmly against the upholstery despite the wild gyrations of the car.

“Twenty minutes to get back to Brentwood,” he calculated aloud. “Five to put Junior here in Andy Kane’s safe—deposit vault. Five more to bring him around with a whiff of ammonia. And then we can find out where Joe is.”

“Nice reasoning.” Ken jerked the words out between clenched teeth. “Except that by the time we find out where Joe is, he may not be there any more.” He pulled the car out of a half—skid and fought its attempt to go into another one.

“Huh?” Sandy thrust his head past Tinker’s shoulder in order to see Ken’s face. “I don’t get it.”

“Once our friend back there realizes he’s really lost us—and that Tinker’s no longer in command—he’ll rush to headquarters to report. And how do we know what’ll happen then?”

Sandy’s hand tightened on Tinker’s shoulder. “I never thought of that. You’re right. It’s too risky.”

They were both silent as Ken slowed sufficiently to make a sharp right turn into another gravel road.

When he had picked up speed again, Sandy twisted around to peer out the rear window. “He’s still with us,” Sandy reported a moment later. “But he’s way behind.” Only a faint hazy glow suggested their pursuer’s presence.

“If we’re right about Hangman’s Inn being their hide—out,” Sandy said a moment later, “why not just go there now? We can beat him to it.”

“And if we’re wrong?” Ken shook his head. “We’ve got a guide—why not use him?”

“You mean—?” Sandy began.

“Sure.” Ken jerked his head rearward. “He ought to be heading for there as soon as he’s sure Tinker’s slipped up.”

“O.K.,” Sandy agreed, after a moment’s thought. “But what about this?” he added, indicating Tinker.

“We’ll let him sleep it off in a field. Might as well get rid of him

right now.” Even as he spoke Ken was braking the car to a swift halt.

Less than half a minute later Tinker’s unconscious figure had been settled in the dry bed of the roadside ditch, well out of sight of the road, and they were back in the convertible and on their way again. A quick glance back into the pall of dust had failed to reveal the coupe’s approaching headlights.

A short half mile beyond the place where they had left Tinker they emerged suddenly at the highway.

“Crandon’s to our left?” Ken asked, slowing at the junction.

Sandy nodded. “And so’s Hangman’s Inn.”

Ken swung to the right—toward Brentwood—and drove a hundred yards. He waited for an oncoming truck to pass, and then made a U—turn and pulled the car to a halt well off the road. He snapped off the lights and let the engine idle gently in the darkness.

Just ahead of them, on the left, was the gravel road over which they had traveled. Above it, thick in the light of a late—rising moon, the dust still hung. And as they watched, it took on a fuzzy glow.

“Here he comes,” Sandy muttered.

In little more than a minute the glow brightened, and suddenly became two distinct headlight beams approaching the highway. The coupe halted at the edge of the concrete, hesitated an instant, and then turned left and sped down the highway away from them, toward Crandon.

Ken let the single taillight become a small speck before he turned on his own lights and got the convertible moving. Five miles went by—and then five more. The coupe was keeping a steady pace of fifty miles an hour, passing cars and trucks, moving from one lane to another, doing everything possible to make time.

“How much farther?” Ken asked.

“About five more miles to Crandon,” Sandy told him.

“The old inn’s beyond that?” Ken swerved around a truck and pulled back into line, after making sure that their quarry was still two cars ahead.

“You can get there by going through the town. Or you can cut off a couple of miles this side and head north on a small road.”

Ken overtook the two intervening cars and pulled back into line a couple of hundred feet behind the coupe. “Small road? Sounds tricky. We’d be the only two cars on it—he’d spot us fast.”

“Watch it!”

A stop light blazed into life ahead. The coupe was slowing down.

Ken checked their own speed and pulled far to the right. “Hope somebody gets between us fast.” He glanced into the rear—view mirror, measuring the distance between the convertible and an oncoming trailer truck. “I shouldn’t have passed those—”

The truck's horn ripped a blast through the night and Ken slowed still further, permitting the huge vehicle to sweep past and pull into the right lane in front of them. But an instant later the truck was edging out into the left lane again to pass the coupe.

When they could see clearly ahead again, the coupe was already turning northward off the highway on a graveled road.

It was too late for the convertible to make the turn. Ken braked, pulled over into the shoulder and then backed up.

"Give him a head start," Sandy said. "We can follow his dust trail."

Instinctively they both reached forward to close the car windows, before they headed into the heavy dun—colored cloud.

"I guess you'd call this poetic justice," Ken muttered, coughing, "but I still don't like it."

"We're lucky to have something to follow," Sandy pointed out.

Sandy took a map out of the glove compartment and bent low to study the network of lines under the dashboard light.

"Know where we are?" Ken asked.

"Sure. And we ought to be turning—"

Ken applied the brakes hard. The convertible had suddenly emerged from the dust into clear night air.

"Must have passed a crossroad," he said. "We've lost him."

"I was just going to tell you about that."

Ken backed, found the crossroad, and made the turn. Once more they were enveloped in dust. "How much further?" Ken asked.

"As far as I can figure," Sandy told him, "the old inn can't be much more than a mile from here. I don't think we should drive any closer."

Ken slowed the car, nodding. "Right. And we'd better get this thing off the road."

Three minutes later the convertible was safely stowed behind a clump of elderberry bushes several yards from the road, and the boys were climbing out.

"Back to the road," Sandy said, "and then straight ahead the way we were going."

The dust caught at their throats and made their eyes smart, and for a time was heavy enough to make even walking difficult. But gradually it dissolved away, and when they were a half mile from the car Sandy stopped.

"See that hill?" He pointed to the right, where—through the now comparatively clear air—a rounded mass was visible against the faintly lit sky. "The ruins of the inn are just at the foot of it, on this side. There's an old lane that leads up to it. We ought to be coming to it in a couple of hundred feet now. But it might be guarded."

"Especially right now," Ken agreed. "So?"

"So we can cut across fields instead. Go right off here, climb the

hill on the far side, and come down on the inn from the rear.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ken said. “Lead on.”

They took sight on a towering oak that stood like a sentry on the hilltop, and kept their steps headed toward it. The field they entered was grass—grown and fairly easy going, but at the spot where the ground began to rise they stumbled into a barbed—wire fence.

“You first,” Ken said quietly, putting a foot on the lower strand and pulling up on the upper one.

Sandy crawled through and then held the wires apart for Ken.

“When we get to the top of the hill, we may be able to see something,” Sandy said.

After that, they didn’t try to talk. The hillside was rough and full of brambles, and they saved their breath for the climb.

They were disappointed when they reached the crest. The moon was behind a cloud just then, and nothing was visible below them except the bare branches of a heavy stand of trees.

Cautiously they started the descent.

Halfway down Sandy caught Ken’s arm. “There—right below us,” he whispered.

Ken could just make out the towering stone walls of the ruined building.

Suddenly he caught his breath. “Look—a light!”

They both saw it the next time—a dim brief flicker almost at ground level, at the foot of the old structure.

“Come on,” Ken whispered.

Walking even more cautiously than they had before, they moved forward until they were almost at the bottom of the hill. Only fifty feet ahead of them the stone ruin reared skyward. It was through an aperture near its base that the light occasionally appeared.

Sandy put his mouth close to Ken’s ear. “Somebody’s in the old cellar, all right.”

Ken nodded, and then tensed. “Listen!”

Almost as soon as they identified the faint sound as the engine of an approaching car, they saw its headlights gleam. It was making its way along the lane leading to the inn.

As silently as possible the boys crept forward another few feet, until they had an unobstructed view of the clearing south of the ruins.

The headlights swung as the car turned, and for a brief moment they illuminated the coupe, parked near the stone wall, and another vehicle—a railroad maintenance truck!

And then the headlights swung away from them and stopped, their beams piercing the darkness above bare grassy ground. A car door slammed, and a shadowy figure dashed across the path of the lights toward the inn.

An instant later loud voices broke out from the direction of the cellar, and almost immediately three men emerged from the dim ruins and moved toward the car. The flashlights they held glinted menacingly on the revolvers two of the men carried.

The trio vanished into the shadows surrounding the car, and voices rose in an incomprehensible babel.

Then six figures moved back toward the ruins, in the path the three had taken. The two in the center of the group were obviously captives of the other four—surrounded by them, and the target for their guns and lights.

For a single instant one of the flashlights bounced high enough to show the faces of the central figures.

Ken and Sandy both gasped. The captives were Pop and Bert!

CHAPTER XV

TINKER'S TURN

Surprise and shock froze Ken and Sandy into complete immobility. Not two hundred feet from them, clearly outlined now in the converging rays of three flashlights, Pop and Bert were being marched toward the stone ruins of Hangman's Inn like two prisoners on their way to execution.

In front of the towering redheads, and walking crabwise to keep their eyes on the prisoners, the two lead guards stumbled along through the darkness trying to light their own footsteps at the same time that they held their beams on Pop and Bert. And behind the two Allens walked another pair of guards, sharing a single flashlight but each holding revolvers aimed at the broad backs ahead.

Bert's leather jacket was ripped down the back and Pop's left sleeve seemed to hang by a thread. Their faces had looked grimly set, in that one brief glance the boys had had, and their fists were clenched at their sides.

The close-ordered little group was taking a course that would lead them around to the front of the ruined building—a line of march that would bring them within fifty feet of the corner of the old masonry wall behind which Ken and Sandy were standing.

Ken blinked his eyes and gave himself a shake. Almost at the same moment Sandy seemed to dig his feet more firmly into the sod.

"Rush them?" he breathed. The words barely carried the six inches to Ken's ear.

Ken's answer was a grasp of Sandy's arm. Quietly he pulled him behind the projection of the wall. "Too dangerous," he whispered then. "Come on."

He edged his way back along the wall toward the low window from which they had first seen the light. It was a small opening at ground level, three feet wide but scarcely a foot high.

Cautiously Ken lowered himself to the ground and, lying on his stomach, peered in. Sandy got down beside him.

Only a single flickering candle, set atop a box, was visible in what Ken felt certain was actually an enormous room. The candle illuminated only a small circle, and within that circle half a dozen other boxes stood, like chairs around a table. No other furniture was in sight.

The great blackened beams overhead were festooned with cobwebs and crumbling with rot, and the wide planks above them, forming the floor of the ground story, also seemed rotted by age and weather.

Sections of them had fallen entirely away, disclosing patches of night sky through the roofless upper stories.

From the far end of the cellar there came a sound of scuffling footsteps. Ken and Sandy turned their eyes in that direction, trying in vain to discern some movement in the darkness.

And then a narrow beam of light sprang into being, laying a white path down a flight of rough stone steps descending to the cellar floor. Feet appeared on the steps, and in a moment the six men they had seen a few minutes before were standing around the candle—Pop and Bert in the center, pin-pointed by the three flashlight beams, menaced by the two guns.

“Sit down.” The man who issued the order spoke through a handkerchief stained red with blood. He pointed to two boxes as if not certain he could be understood.

“Having a little trouble talking?” Pop asked. As he spoke, his big right hand gestured casually toward the handkerchief—and the man holding it jumped hastily back, waving his gun wildly.

Pop grinned faintly, rubbed his knuckles with a reflective air and sat down on the nearest box. Bert took the one next to him. “Now what?” Pop asked.

“Yeah.” One of the men who had walked in front of the Allens spoke. “What do we do with them?”

“I know what I’d *like* to do.” A third man moved closer, raising his gun as if to strike. The discoloration of his left cheek was clearly the beginning of what would undoubtedly be a spectacular black eye.

“Cut it out, Nick,” the fourth member of the quartet said quickly. “We have to wait for the boss.”

“He’s going to like this, all right.” The handkerchief came down from the bloody mouth. “First Tinker lets those two kids take him. Then Rudy”—he glared at a dumpy figure half in shadow—“lets *them* get away. And—”

Ken and Sandy looked with interest at Rudy, the man who had apparently been driving the coupe. And Ken realized, with a start, that he was also the chauffeur-driven “bird watcher” who had hoped to find a “pied typer.”

“You didn’t do so good, either,” Rudy was muttering defensively. “Anyway, what could I do with all that dust hiding everything—and those kids driving like fools?”

From somewhere in the cellar came a hollow cough.

Pop swung toward the sound. “Is that Driscoll? Where is he? What have you done to him?”

Bert was half on his feet.

“Sit down and stay there—both of you! He’s all right.” The authoritative voice was that of the tall, thin man who had told the

others to wait for the boss.

"I don't like the sound of that cough!" Pop said furiously. "Pneumonia at his age!"

"Shut up! I told you he's all right. Nick," the tall man went on, turning to the one with the black eye, "go in there and check up on the old man. Make sure he's all right."

"Why me, Jack? I'm no nursemaid!"

"Go on. Has he had his supper, Lefty?"

Lefty spoke around the handkerchief, which was back again at his mouth. "Sure. Like the boss said. Can of soup and a bottle of milk."

"You see?" Jack waited until Nick had started toward the outer rim of the lighted space before he turned to Pop and Bert. "We told you nothing was going to happen to him. We even brought him some books he wanted. Why you people had to get so worked up over the whole thing—"

"Flash a light over this way, will you?" Nick said.

A flashlight ray aimed itself at him, disclosing the heavy timber door he was approaching. Nick kicked away a plank used to jam it tightly into the stone wall, and the door swung slowly open.

A series of racking coughs sounded in the silence.

Pop stirred, and immediately the guns trained on him flicked nervously.

Nick poked his head through the opening, and then pulled the door shut again and barred it. "He's all right," he muttered, returning to the circle of light. "All nice and warm under those blankets of his."

"So what do we do, Jack?" Rudy asked.

"I told you. We wait for the boss. He may call the whole thing off on account of the kids—only he'll say it's on account of you and Tinker, and things won't be so rosy for you two. If Tinker's been hauled to the cops by now, no telling what he may have spilled."

"That's right," Nick said. "For all we know the cops may be on their way here right now."

"The boss'll—"

"Listen!" Rudy suddenly darted to the steps and disappeared from sight. An instant later he reappeared. "Car coming. I'll go meet it."

Ken touched Sandy's arm and they wriggled backward until they were several feet away from the opening and dared to stand upright. Then they moved quietly toward the corner of the wall and flattened themselves against the rough stone in time to see Rudy cross the open ground and lose himself in the shadow of the bushes bordering the lane.

The car was close now, its headlights making strange patterns through the bare branches. It turned into the clearing and stopped.

It was the big sedan.

The headlights blacked out and a door opened.

A stab of light from Rudy's flash showed a tall angular figure backing out of the driver's seat.

"Kill the light, you fool!" The voice was an unidentifiable hiss.

"Sure, boss, sure. Just checking up."

"You ought to know this car by now." The door closed with a click. "Everything all set?"

"Well—I don't exactly know, boss." Rudy spoke hesitantly.

"What don't you know? What's wrong?" The words were like the flick of a whip.

"Well—a couple of things. Nothing was our fault, boss. We just—"

The new arrival cut him off. "I'll talk to Jack."

Together the two men hurried across the clearing like two shadowy wraiths.

The boys moved rapidly back to the cellar window. When they were able to look into the dusky room once more they could see the feet of the four men shift nervously.

The newcomer was apparently standing in the shadows at the foot of the steps.

"Keep those lights off me," he was reminding his men as the boys peered into the darkness trying to catch a glimpse of his figure. "All right, Jack," he said, when all the flashlights were obediently pointing at Pop and Bert, "what happened?"

"It wasn't our fault, boss," Nick began. "We—"

"Shut up." The voice was quiet but deadly. "I asked Jack."

Sandy suddenly cocked his head to listen. His keen ears had caught the faint sound of an engine. He nudged Ken and began to crawl backward.

Together, a moment later, they had regained their lookout position at the corner, and were gazing down the lane for some sight of an approaching car.

Ken saw the first glimmer. "Down by the road," he murmured.

They watched carefully for a moment before they realized that the car was not turning into the long lane that led to the inn. Suddenly the lights were gone and the noise of the engine reached them even more faintly.

"Just somebody who took a wrong road," Sandy whispered. "See? He's turned around now."

Ken nodded. He, too, had seen the tiny gleam of a red taillight.

Ken stood still for a moment. So much had happened in the past minutes that neither of them had had any chance to consider the situation—to realize its complexities.

But trying to think about it—to decide what to do—seemed hopeless.

Should their first concern be to try to get the police? Or ought they to attempt to let Pop and Bert know that they were in the vicinity? What was the wisest move so far as Joe was concerned? And what was the major purpose of all these men—a purpose so vital to them that they hadn't hesitated to hold an old man prisoner, and to capture and bring to their melodramatic hide-out two powerful adversaries like Pop and Bert?

Ken ran a hand over his hair. This was no time for indecision—for doing nothing.

"Let's fix these cars so they can't get away," he whispered. "Then we'll figure something out."

"But—" Sandy gestured toward the cellar, and Ken knew that he wanted to take some drastic action immediately—some action that would be at least a small step toward freedom for Pop and Bert.

"Later," Ken whispered firmly. "Come on."

With Sandy beside him he skirted the clearing, sticking to the bushes that edged it to avoid crossing the open, faintly moonlit area.

When they were half a dozen yards from the nearest vehicle—the coupe—Ken breathed, "I'll handle this one. You take care of the sedan."

"Check."

Ken opened the door of the coupe and reached inside below the dashboard for the hood latch. He began to pull gently, hoping to keep the noise of the releasing catch to a minimum.

And then he heard the pounding footsteps coming up the lane. He turned swiftly. His fingers slipped on the latch and the spring snapped it back into place with a loud click.

Ken went rigid, half in and half out of the car.

The footsteps had stopped.

And then, directly behind him, Ken heard a rasping sound. He twisted his head.

At first he could see only the flare of a cigarette lighter. And then, above it, he saw Tinker's blazing eyes looking directly into his.

The man's lips lifted in a thin smile. His left hand raised the lighter a little higher, and the flickering flame glinted on the blade of an opened jackknife in his right hand.

Tinker moved forward slowly.

"Now it's my turn," he said.

CHAPTER XVI

CAPTURED!

tinker moved forward another step and Ken's head jerked instinctively back.

"Go ahead," Tinker taunted. "Try and run now." The knife in his right hand gleamed. "Why don't you—?"

That was as far as he got. Sandy's two hundred pounds struck him from behind.

The lighter flew out of Tinker's hand and went out. The hand holding the knife was twisted down and then back and up.

"Drop it!" Sandy said. "Drop it!" He forced the clenched fist another two inches up the man's back.

Tinker moaned once.

The knife fell to the ground.

Sandy swung him around and stepped back a short pace. Tinker's face made a dim white target in the darkness. Then Sandy's right fist connected, his arm driving less than a foot before it was stopped by the jar. He struck once more as Tinker fell back.

The man's knees buckled and he went down with a thud.

Sandy stood over him, breathing hard.

"I hate knives," he said.

"So do I." Ken's whisper was a little shaky. "Thanks, pardner." He had pulled himself out of the car now and was standing erect. "Let's get him out of the way before his friends find him," he added.

For the second time that night Tinker found a bed in the thick grass of a dry ditch.

"There," Ken breathed, straightening up. "And now let's get those cars—" He broke off abruptly to listen.

Voices were coming from the direction of the ruins, and feet grated loudly on stone. Two flashlights angled around the corner of the wall and headed toward the coupe.

"Down!" Ken dropped flat on the ground.

Sandy landed close beside him. "Think they heard us?" The words were fainter than the rustle of a dry leaf.

"Wait." That was all Ken trusted himself to say.

The two men were already less than twenty feet away, fumbling with the door of the coupe.

"It's risky," one of them said, in an angry mutter. "How do we know what those kids have done by now—or how much Tinker's spilled? We might be walking into a trap if—"

"Can it, Nick. The boss usually knows what he's doing. Get the

tape and hurry up. One thing's sure, anyway—those two we've got in the cellar aren't going to be in our way when we get done with 'em."

"It's not those guys I'm worried about."

"Sure. I know. Got the stuff?"

"Yeah. Here it is."

"O.K. Let's get back there before the boss yells at us for stalling around. Besides, if we *are* going to pull it, we'll have to start out of here in less than half an hour."

Their lights swung around and headed back toward the cellar.

A minute later Ken got quietly to his feet. "We've got to see what they're doing."

Cautiously they retraced their steps through the grass and underbrush to the north side of the ruin, and took up their post flat on the ground before the low opening in the wall.

Nick was unbarring the door to the room from which Joe's coughs had sounded. Pop and Bert were still seated in a pool of light, carefully watched by three men. The boss was not visible.

But a voice came from the deep shadows in the far corner of the big chamber. "Tie them up."

Jack took a step closer to Pop. "You first," he ordered. "Stand up and put your hands behind your back."

A prod with the muzzle of a revolver emphasized the order.

Pop got to his feet and crossed his wrists behind him. "This is going to be just one more thing for you to account for eventually," he pointed out calmly.

"We'll worry about that." Rudy began to wrap Pop's wrists with adhesive tape in the light of Jack's torch.

When he had completed half a dozen circuits he tore the tape from the roll and looked questioningly into the darkness of the corner. "Now his feet?"

"If you've got the strength to carry them into the other room, by all means tie his feet now." The voice had an edge of amused scorn. "But I should think you'd rather let them walk inside, and tie them there."

"Sure, boss. That's the best idea. Now you." He motioned to Bert.

When the hands of both the Allens were securely bound, Nick walked over to stand in front of them.

"You're not so handy with your mitts now, are you, big boy?" he said, grinning, and his own hand drew back to strike.

"Stop that!" The order crackled.

Nick let his hand drop slowly. "He's got it coming," he muttered.

"And we've got more important things to do. Get them both inside. And make sure you do a good job on their feet."

"How about the old man?" Rudy asked. "He might be able to—"

“Tie him too,” the boss broke in.

From the room beyond the door there came another series of racking coughs.

Pop’s face, which had been so blandly calm, turned an angry red. “He’s a sick man!” he said. “And I’m warning all of you that if anything happens to him you’re going to pay for it. If it takes me—”

“Get them inside.”

Two revolvers obediently nosed against the two broad backs and Pop and Bert were led through the door by Rudy and Jack.

“What about Tinker, boss?” Lefty asked when they had disappeared. He no longer held his handkerchief to his mouth, but his lips looked discolored and swollen.

“If he’s fool enough to get caught, I’m afraid that’s his problem.”

“Sure—sure, boss. But if he shoots off his mouth about—”

“Would you like to direct this operation?”

“No,” Lefty said hastily. “Of course not. I just thought—”

“I don’t expect you to think. I’ll take care of that end of things.” As the quiet deadly voice spoke, a downward-pointing flashlight came on, illuminating a small circle of dirt floor and a pair of well-polished black shoes. As if they were walking by themselves, the shoes moved toward the stairs.

“I’m going now,” the voice said, out of the darkness above them. “You all know what you’re to do. You know where to go as soon as you finish—and you understand you’re to remain until you hear from me. I may have to get in touch with you tomorrow.”

Jack appeared in the doorway to the other room. “O.K., boss. They’re tied up now—all three of them. But—”

The shoes had paused at the foot of the stairs. “But what?”

“I don’t like the looks of the old-timer. He’s breathing kind of funny and—”

“I don’t think you need concern yourself about his respiratory system—or his future, either.” The toe of one shoe tapped impatiently. “Nobody asked him to stick his nose into our business.”

“I know that, boss. But you know what the charge would be if—”

“Nobody is charged with anything unless he’s caught. And I don’t intend to be caught. Is that clear?”

Jack sighed. “O.K. You’re the boss.”

“Exactly. Just keep that fact in mind.” Briskly the black shoes mounted the stairs and disappeared.

Ken nudged Sandy and together they crawled silently away from the wall.

“It’s too late to fix the cars,” Sandy whispered.

“Let them go.” Ken nodded toward the cellar and Sandy nodded back. If the men departed, they would have an opportunity to release

Pop and Bert and Joe.

They moved stealthily along the wall to the corner, guiding their footsteps with a hand on the rough stone.

Suddenly Ken's foot touched something springy—something that yielded beneath his weight. He tried to pull back, but Sandy's body, right behind his, thrust him forward.

Loud cracking sounds rent the air as timber rotted by almost a century of neglect gave way beneath him. Ken sank through an old cellar door into the void below.

He could feel Sandy's hand grabbing desperately at him, closing on the cloth of his mackinaw. And then Sandy, still clinging to the jacket, was dragged down with him.

They landed on hard earth and the splintered remains of the collapsed timbers.

Before Sandy could haul himself off Ken's prone figure, flashlight beams blinded them. Hoarse cries sounded, feet thudded—and four figures came rushing toward them.

Sandy rolled to one side and kicked, his feet catching Rudy in the stomach and sending his body off in a ten-foot arc. Nick made a dive for Ken, and landed flat on the ground when Ken slithered out of his way.

Ken got as far as his knees when he saw Jack charging at him. There was no time to ready a blow—no time to prepare a defense. Ken let himself fall across the man's path.

Flying feet thudded into his ribs with a jolt that almost lifted him off the ground. But speed and the jar against Ken had destroyed Jack's balance. He fell across Nick in a tangled jungle of arms and legs.

And then suddenly Sandy was on his feet again, and measuring the fourth man for a knockout blow.

"Stop it!" The crack of the command was followed by the crack of a revolver shot.

They could hear the bullet smash into the stone wall and ricochet off to plow a furrow in the dirt floor.

"Get your hands up!"

Blinded by the light, the boys obeyed.

A well-polished black shoe reached out and nudged Rudy, who was still on the ground holding his stomach and moaning. "Get up."

"I—can't—catch my breath," Rudy gasped.

"Jack then—and Lefty." The shoes turned away from Rudy as the voice shifted direction. "Tape them up." The flashlight aimed itself directly into the boys' eyes. "Where's Tinker?" the quiet voice demanded.

"Who?" Ken asked.

Nick, still staggering slightly, shouldered his way between the two

boys. "I'll make 'em talk."

At close quarters his bruised eye was a vast dark patch.

"Get out of the way." The flashlight gestured Nick aside.

Both boys felt their hands jerked down and back, and adhesive tape bound tightly around their wrists. Ken could feel numbness creeping up from his finger tips even before the job was done.

"I asked you a question." The voice above the flashlight spoke again. "Where's the man who was in the car with you?"

Neither of the boys answered. Ken focused his eyes on the darkness to the right of the light, and tried not to wince as the tape cut into his flesh.

"Let me ask 'em," Nick insisted.

"Never mind." The light shifted slightly, as if the interest of the man behind it had veered away. "It doesn't make any real difference. If Tinker had talked, they'd have been here with the police, instead of by themselves. And if Tinker hasn't talked, I don't much care where he is."

"Where do you want them?" Jack asked, from behind Sandy.

"With the others."

The boys, hauled roughly by the arms, were pushed through the door that Nick opened. Bound figures on the floor were barely visible in the light of a single candle.

"Ken! Sandy!" Pop and Bert spoke almost in unison. "What—!"

"Shut up. You'll have plenty of time for talking after we've finished with you. Plenty of time!" Rudy shoved Ken forward. "On the floor—both of you."

Ken's face jarred against dank earth, and then he felt his ankles being tightly taped together. Sandy had landed beside him and was being similarly bound.

"You look cute—the five of you stretched out on the ground," Rudy said, straightening up as he finished. "Ready, Jack?"

"Ready."

Rudy led the way out and the door slammed shut. An instant later they heard the heavy plank jammed in place to hold it.

CHAPTER XVII

ROAD BLOCK

Ken heaved himself over so that he could look toward Pop and Bert. "How—?"

Sandy's urgent words cut across his. "You two all right? And Joe?"

Controlled rage made Pop's voice husky. "You're fine ones to ask questions! How'd *you*—?" Then he broke off and started again. "Yes, we're all right. Just such stupid fools that we walked right past Joe's place. They were watching it—came at us from behind with a gun."

With a mighty thrust against his bound hands he forced himself to a seated position. "But never mind that. Joe's in bad shape. We've got to get him out of here—fast!"

Ken saw the muscles in Pop's neck bulge with effort, and realized that he was straining to rip the adhesive around his wrists. "Don't do that, Pop," he said quickly. "It's impossible. We'll have to think of something else." He looked past Pop at the small blanket-covered figure in the corner. "Can Joe talk? Can he—?"

Bert, inching along the floor toward Pop, cut in quietly. "Joe's unconscious. Blanked out right after we got thrown in here. Just as well, probably." He reached his father's seated figure and muttered, "Turn around. I'll see if I can find the end of the tape."

By the time they were braced against each other, back to back, Ken and Sandy were working themselves into the same position.

For a few minutes there was grim silence in the dusky cellar. Ken's fingers fumbled hopelessly for the cut end of the tape binding Sandy's wrists, and Bert groped at the tightly wrapped bands just above Pop's huge hands.

Bert spoke first. "Can't do it," he panted. "My fingers are so numb I wouldn't recognize the end of the tape if I found it." He slumped forward, head on his knees.

"Anybody got a knife handy?" Sandy asked.

"This is no time for jokes," his father said curtly. "I tell you we've got to get Joe out of here!"

Ken stopped struggling with the tape of Sandy's wrists. He had found no sign of the cut end, and suspected that it must have been tucked snugly between the two wrists, where it could not be reached and pulled by bound hands. He thought desperately that there must be some other way to free themselves.

Suddenly his head jerked up. "Didn't somebody say something about feeding Joe a can of soup? We could use the rough edge of a tin can as a saw, if we could find one."

“Good,” Pop grunted. “That’s a constructive suggestion. Let’s get going.”

The vault in which they were imprisoned was about thirty feet square, and the candle, sitting in a pool of its own wax on the floor, illuminated only a tiny circle around itself. The walls were visible only because the dampness on them glistened fitfully in the flickering gleam.

Ken struggled to his knees. “If we crawl on our knees and each of us takes one corner—” he began. But at that moment he lost his balance and toppled over. Again his face struck hard against packed earth.

“You all right?” Sandy asked, inching toward him.

Ken took a deep breath. “Sure,” he managed. “Don’t wait for me. You all go ahead. I’ll take this corner.”

The little room echoed with grunts and the sound of harsh breathing, as the three Allens twisted themselves into kneeling positions.

“Bert, that’s your corner.” Pop’s head nodded a direction. “Sandy, you take that one. I’ll go over here.”

Ken had managed to regain his own knees by the time the others had edged out of the circle of light.

It was possible to move only a fraction of an inch at a time, and their bound feet had to be lifted awkwardly off the ground to make even that slight motion possible. And then the feet had to be lowered again, for balance, before they could lean far enough sideward and backward to explore a small new section of the rough floor with their taped hands.

No one spoke. Time seemed to stretch out endlessly. The small sounds they made, as they crawled painfully along, were like the scrabblings of rats in the walls of a deserted house.

Occasionally one of them would try too ambitious a forward lurch, and topple over, thudding heavily on the ground. The others would pause then, breath suspended, until a muttered “O.K.” assured them out of the darkness, and the fallen figure struggled up again.

Sharp stones embedded in the earth cut quickly through cloth. It seemed to Ken that his whole body was numb, except for his scratched and bleeding knees.

“There’s nothing here—nothing!” Bert said finally.

“There’s got to be!” Ken said, as much to himself as to the others. And then he forced his voice to a calmer level. “We know they fed Joe. We know they used canned stuff. And I don’t think they’d have cleaned up afterward. Why should they?”

“Why should they indeed?” Pop echoed. “They certainly didn’t expect to come back here—ever. I think we can be sure of that. And

they didn't expect anybody else to discover this out-of-the-way spot, either."

The grim words spoke the thought that was in all their minds: they were faced with more than the problem of getting Joe to a hospital. They had to rescue themselves, too, while they still had the strength. No one would find them in their underground prison. They had been left here to—

A sudden shout from Sandy shattered the dank stillness.

"No!" Sandy said then, furiously, as they all turned toward him. "Thought I had something. It's a can all right—but it's been opened with one of those gadgets that leaves a smooth edge. We couldn't cut butter with it!"

"If the can's there, the lid must be somewhere around," Ken said quickly. "And it'll have a sharp edge. Keep looking."

Renewed hope hastened all their movements for the next few moments.

"If we could carry the candle around," Sandy said then, "there might be a chance. But—"

"And if we dropped the candle, there'd be no chance at all," Pop reminded him.

It might have been a minute, or ten minutes later, when Sandy suddenly let out his breath with a curious little gasp. "Got it!" he said. "I think."

And then the ground shook slightly as he crashed over.

"Coming!" Ken told him quickly, and began to move toward Sandy as quickly as he could.

"I'm—all right. I was—trying to pick it up."

Ken reached his side. "Where was it?"

"Right there—near my knee."

"Got it! You're right!" Ken shouted the words, forgetful for the moment of Joe's quiet figure in the corner. Then he remembered and lowered his voice. "Roll your way back to the candle—it's quicker."

A moment later they were all once again within the pale yellow circle of the candle's glow.

"Good boy," Bert said huskily.

"Sandy," Pop directed briskly, "you get to work on the tape on Ken's wrists. He's smaller than any of us—maybe they put less on him. Bert and I will spell you when you get tired."

"I'm tired already," Sandy said, but there was a grim humor in his voice and they all exchanged fleeting grins.

The possession of even such a feeble weapon as a piece of tin had given them all fresh courage.

Ken and Sandy struggled into position, back to back, and Sandy fumbled the lid in his numb fingers until he felt it rasp against the

tape around Ken's wrists. The faint sound of the sharp edge sawing back and forth over the smooth surface seemed to fill the cellar.

Suddenly Ken gasped and jerked forward. The sharp edge of the tin had slipped and cut his flesh. Then he braced himself and backed up again.

"Sorry," Sandy was muttering.

"Don't mind me," Ken told him. "I'll try not to jump again. Just keep at it."

Their heartbeats measured off the seconds.

"Making any headway?" Pop asked finally.

"I'm getting a cramp in my arm," Sandy said in a strained voice.

"Here—I'll take over." Bert edged toward him. "Pop, you get around there and brace Ken, so I can apply more pressure."

They wasted precious seconds when the lid slipped from Sandy's fingers as Bert reached for it. But finally they were at work again.

Almost immediately Ken stifled an agonized gasp. But he managed to force his lips into a grin. "He's an amateur," he told Sandy, slumped on the floor near him. "You were getting good—hitting the tape at least two out of three strokes."

"Cheer up," Bert told him. "I'm cutting myself at least as often as I'm cutting you."

The minutes crawled by. The candle was growing dangerously short.

Pop, intercepting one of Sandy's worried glances at it, said quickly, "Let's use this time to get caught up on a few things. First, about Joe: he recognized us, all right, before he lost consciousness. Kind of grinned and said, 'I knew you'd understand my messages—knew you were coming when that Rudy fellow asked me if there was a bird called a pied typer.' We asked him what had happened, and he said he'd been out bird watching and suddenly some man had appeared alongside of him and the first thing he knew—And then Joe's voice just kind of drifted off and we realized he'd fainted. So we don't know any more than we did about what this gang of thugs is up to. If we—But no use speculating. What happened to you two tonight? I thought I told you—"

"We did exactly what you said, Pop," Sandy interrupted, and began a recital of their night's adventures.

Ken tried to concentrate on what Sandy was saying, but the pain in his wrists made it impossible. He was wondering how much longer he could stand the agony—measuring the candle's length and trying to figure out if they could risk a moment's rest—when suddenly he felt a shift in the position of his hands.

"It's coming!" he breathed.

Sandy heaved himself over to look. "He's right!" he said excitedly.

“Keep at it, Bert! You’re almost through!”

“Maybe I can tear the rest of it,” Ken said, after Bert had sawed back and forth another dozen times.

“O.K. Try it.” Bert leaned forward to give him room.

“Arms are kind of numb,” Ken muttered, “but here goes.”

Hunching his shoulders together and forcing his elbows outward, he pulled against the frayed tape until his aching muscles could no longer sustain the effort. “No,” he said then. “It’s no good.”

“Just once more,” Sandy urged. “You’re almost through. Twist your wrists.”

Ken waited a moment, took a deep breath, and tried again. He clenched his teeth against the pain, as the tape seemed to be pulling his skin from his flesh.

And then there was a small ripping sound and his hands flew apart.

Ken toppled forward against Pop, eyes closed, breath coming in deep gasps.

“Take it easy,” Pop said quietly. “Good boys—all of you.”

Ken opened his eyes to assure them he was all right, and caught Bert’s glance at his freed hands.

“If I’d been able to see what I was doing to you,” Bert said, “I’d have stopped long ago.”

Ken looked down at his bloody wrists and grinned. “Good thing you couldn’t, then. Give me a minute, and I’ll get going on the rest of you.”

He rubbed his hands together until the feeling began to come back to the numbed fingers. As soon as he could move them with any surety, he squirmed around until he could reach Pop’s hands.

The cut end of the tape was, as he had thought, tucked between the crossed wrists, but it was comparatively easy to reach it when he had the free use of his hands and the light of the now-guttering candle.

Within a moment Pop’s hands too were free, and then he and Ken went to work on Sandy and Bert. There was still a tiny flame left in the candle when they had all unloosened the tape around their ankles.

“All right,” Pop said then, as they moved their cramped muscles to restore circulation, “the door’s our best bet.” He examined the framework of heavy beams salvaged from the ruins, completed with planking of what looked like recently milled wood.

Experimentally he pushed at it. It shook, but showed no signs of giving.

“Give me a hand, Bert,” Pop ordered. “When I say go, give it all you’ve got.”

“Right.”

“Go!”

Four hundred and fifty pounds of bone and muscle struck the door at the same instant.

“Once more,” Pop ordered. “Go!”

The door shuddered, but held.

“Sandy,” Pop said, “there’s room for you here too. Come on.”

The three Allens stood, shoulder to shoulder—over six hundred pounds of power—awaiting Pop’s command.

“Go!”

That time the door curved momentarily under the impact—but when they drew back it still held firm.

“That plank outside would hold an elephant,” Sandy said. “We’ll never make it.”

“Drive against the hinges—not against the plank,” Ken suggested. “Maybe the screws will give.”

Pop’s huge hand explored the hinge side of the door. “Nailed on,” he muttered. “Nails bent over on this side.” He shrugged. “Well—let’s try it. Just room for two of us this time, though.” He looked at Bert. “Ready?”

“Wait a minute.” Ken stripped off his mackinaw. “Put this against your shoulder, Pop. A little padding will let you hit harder.”

Sandy quickly slipped off his own coat and handed it to Bert.

Pop and Bert took up their positions again, two feet back from the door’s rough surface.

“Go!”

There was a crack of breaking wood, and a sharper sound of snapping metal. The top of the door hung slightly open—the upper hinge had given way.

“Once more. Go!”

The door flew out of the doorway as if it had been blasted by a charge of dynamite.

For a moment they stood staring at each other, almost dazed by the realization that they were free. And then the wavering candle flame finally fluttered and died.

Ken wasn’t sure he could trust his voice when he said, finally, “Sandy and I’ll go and get the car and bring it up here, Pop—while you and Bert bring Joe outside.”

They took a moment to look for Tinker, and found that he had vanished, and then they headed straight for the convertible.

Fifteen minutes later Joe’s small blanket-wrapped body, still limp and unconscious, was on the back seat of the car, cradled against Pop’s shoulder. Sandy was in the driver’s seat and Ken and Bert were crowded in beside him.

“When you hit the highway,” Pop said quietly, “open it up.”

They covered the first two miles of the highway in two minutes. And then Sandy was suddenly grinding to a stop in front of an emergency barricade that blocked the road.

“What now?” Pop asked grimly.

A State Trooper was approaching the car, his powerful flashlight aimed full in Sandy’s face.

“Sorry,” the uniformed figure said, his voice polite but hard. “Have to ask you all to step out a minute.”

“What—!” Pop glared at him. “We’ve got a sick man here—we’re heading for a hospital. If you—”

“Sorry,” the trooper said again, unmoved. “We’ll let you go on just as soon as we’re sure you’re not carrying any oil paintings you can’t account for.”

“Oil paintings!” Ken echoed.

“That’s right.” The trooper’s jaw was a square hard line in the shadows behind his flashlight. “There was a train robbery tonight right outside of Brentwood—a million dollars’ worth of oil paintings stolen out of the baggage car!”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LOOT SLIPS THROUGH

It was Ken who finally broke the stunned silence that followed the trooper’s announcement.

“Of course,” he said dazedly. “The Manhattan Museum traveling exhibit. We should have guessed. That would make a train holdup worth while even—”

“Who told you where the paintings came from?” The officer had thrust his face closer and his hand was on the holster at his hip. “Just what do you—?”

“What’s wrong here, Bartecki?” Another uniformed figure had materialized out of the darkness, and another square-jawed face—this one older and more lined—appeared just outside the car window.

Pop Allen spoke from the rear seat before Bartecki could answer.

“Lieutenant James!” Pop said. “Thank heaven it’s you! We—”

“It’s Allen of the Brentwood *Advance*, isn’t it?” The tall figure bent to peer into the car, and a grin cracked the square face. “What’s in the blanket, Pop? Not a couple of Rembrandts, by any chance?”

“Friend of mine. We’re trying to get him to the hospital while there’s still time.” Pop spoke quickly. “Your picture-stealers had him imprisoned in a cellar down the road. Had the lot of us for a while. So we’ve got plenty to tell you, Lieutenant. But first we’ve got to get Joe to a doctor. Fast!”

“Right.” James reacted instantly and decisively, issuing half a dozen orders before he stopped for breath.

A radio call went out to alert the Brentwood hospital, and another went to the nearest state police headquarters. Two of the troopers at the barricade were assigned to an immediate and thorough search of Hangman's Inn, and one was ordered to remain on the spot until he was relieved. Sandy volunteered to guide them there.

"O.K. if I take my camera?" he asked at the last moment.

"Sure—take it along," James told him. "The *Advance* deserves a break if you're going to help us crack this thing."

While Sandy was hauling out his camera, James was stepping into the front seat of the convertible, beside Bert. Ken slid over behind the wheel.

"All right," the lieutenant said. "Let's get going for the hospital. You can give me the rest of the dope on the way. Bartecki!" He leaned out the window. "Get us to Brentwood as fast as you can!"

"Yes, sir!" Bartecki leaped on his motorcycle and gunned it to life. "What speed can you make?" he asked Ken.

Ken grinned briefly. "It's up to you, officer," he said, and flipped on the key that Sandy had turned off.

Bartecki looked at him suspiciously for an instant and then his motorcycle shot off, its siren drowning out the roar of the exhaust.

Ken had the accelerator jammed to the floor before the convertible had traveled a dozen feet, and the speedometer began to climb in frenzied leaps.

"O.K.," James said. "Let's have it—all of it."

Bert did most of the talking, appealing to Ken or Pop for certain details. James whistled quietly once or twice, muttered occasional noises that sounded like "Crazy amateurs!" and took rapid scrawled notes on a pad balanced on his knee. But he didn't interrupt.

Ken scarcely heard the recital. All his attention was on driving. At the end of the first two miles he was so close on the motorcycle's tail that he had to ease up slightly on the pedal. He tapped a signal on the horn. Bartecki risked a quick look behind, and then bent over his handle bars and gave his cycle all it would take.

Seventy ... seventy-five ... eighty ... eighty-five ... the convertible's speedometer resumed its upward climb. Other cars on the highway, warned by the shrieking siren and the pulsing red light, pulled off to the side of the road as the two vehicles tore down upon them.

Ken's hands were firm on the wheel, his eyes steady ahead. Despite the grim purpose behind the ride, he knew a fierce pride in the way the convertible responded to his touch.

When the speedometer had hung at eighty-five for two miles straight, Ken touched the horn again. Bartecki huddled still farther over his handle bars and the distance between the two vehicles lengthened slightly.

Ken pressed the accelerator and found that there was still a little play in it. His foot forced it down. The distance between his headlights and the motorcycle's taillight shrank once more.

They swept past Joe's lane at better than ninety miles an hour, slowed to turn off the highway, and then raced up Elm Street toward the hospital at a steady mile-a-minute clip.

There was a stretcher already awaiting them at the emergency entrance—and Joe was being wheeled away less than fifteen minutes after they had started the wild twenty-mile ride.

Bartecki was mopping his brow when he walked up to the little group standing in the entrance.

"What have you got under that hood?" he muttered.

Ken grinned but didn't get a chance to answer him. Pop had signaled to him and to Bert to go around to the front desk and give the admission details on Joe, while Pop himself went upstairs to interview the doctor.

"I'll meet you back here," Lieutenant James said, as they started to move away. "I'll put some calls through —and then I want you to hear what we know about this whole setup. Might suggest a few more details to you. Bartecki," he added, "you get back to the road block."

"Yes, sir. Can I take it a little easier this trip?"

Nearly two hours later, back in the *Advance* office, Ken jerked out of the typewriter the final take on the section of the story Pop had assigned to him. At their own machines Pop and Bert were still hard at work. Sandy had not yet returned.

Ken stood up and stretched, absent-mindedly touching his bandaged and still painful wrists. He wondered if there were any point in calling the hospital—and reminded himself firmly that the doctor had assured Pop he would report any change in Joe's condition. They had left Joe under an oxygen tent, with two nurses and two doctors in attendance. Neither doctor would promise anything, but they had told Pop not to give up hope—yet.

It had helped, afterward, to have Lieutenant James talk rapidly to them for fifteen minutes. The account of the robbery swept everything else out of their minds as they listened. And it had also helped when Pop decided to get out an extra, and had put them all to work at top speed the minute they got back to the office. Hank, called at home out of a sound sleep, was already at the linotype.

Pop glanced up and saw that Ken had finished. "Well, don't just stand there!" he barked. "Phone the story to Global!"

"Right." Ken rubbed his eyes. The fact that he hadn't thought of that himself was startling proof of how the night's events had affected him.

It was impossible not to feel that they might have rescued Joe

earlier if they had been more intelligent. Or that they might have forestalled the incredible theft of the paintings if only they—

Ken gave himself a shake, sat down at his desk, and repeated the Global News number to the long-distance operator.

“Mr. Granger?” he was saying a few moments later, “This is Ken Holt here. We’ve got a really big one for you this time ...”

At the end of his third sentence, Granger cut him off short. “I’ll say it’s a big one. Hang on. I’ll give you a rewrite man and you can hand it to him straight. Don’t suppose you’ve got any pictures?”

“We’re expecting Sandy to turn up with some any time now. Not of the criminals, of course,” Ken added disgustedly. “They’re still at large—and they sound smart enough to stay that way.”

Granger grunted. “Well, give us what you have.”

Ken phrased the sentences for the rewrite man as succinctly as possible.

“Here goes. Background first. Manhattan Museum traveling exhibit concluded its stay in Colfax at 5 o’clock tonight.” He glanced up at the clock and saw the hands pointing to one. “Last night,” he corrected. “Paintings in the show—you can get that list from your own morgue; it includes a Rembrandt and a Van Gogh and others, totaling a value of over two million, were packed immediately in eighteen crates for shipment to Belville on the westbound 9:25 train. Shipment escorted to station by three armed guards and locked in baggage car—one guard traveled with it—together with two large crates marked machinery, also leaving Colfax.”

Ken took a deep breath. “O.K.? ... Right. Now this next stuff is the report of the train’s engineer, Tom Falk, aged 51, resident Belville. Falk says train proceeded on schedule out of Colfax, reached Brentwood at 10:10, also on schedule, picked up mail and left Brentwood at 10:12. But two miles outside of Brentwood, at 10:17, the train was halted by an unexpected red signal. It lasted three minutes, then turned to green, and the train proceeded to Belville. Arrived late—at 10:47.”

“But I thought—” the Global rewrite man began.

“You thought right,” Ken told him. “Lights don’t change from red to green. Falk knows that too. He reported the signal as out of order when he reached Belville. He was still inside the station, reporting, when the station baggageman—Roger Brusach, aged 37, also of Belville—wondered why the baggage-car door wasn’t being unlocked from inside. He began to pound on it and then discovered the door *wasn’t* locked. He slid it open and found the museum guard and the two baggagemen gagged and taped up. Four of the eighteen crates were missing—the ones containing the Rembrandt, the Holbein, the Van Gogh, and the Picasso.”

The phone on Pop's desk rang. Pop grabbed it.

"Wait a minute," Ken said into his own instrument.

Pop listened, his face gray with weariness and concern. When he hung up he said briefly, "Joe's still unconscious—not responding very well to the oxygen." He attacked his machine again with new ferocity.

Ken swallowed before he began again. "Now for the story as told by Burton Gotschalk, the museum guard. He—... What? ... Oh! Forty years old. Resident of New York, 650 West 17th Street ... Right. He says that just after the train left the Brentwood station, two armed men suddenly emerged from the two crates marked machinery. One of them disarmed the baggagemen and the guard, the other unlocked the door and started shoving the museum crates around.

"When the train stopped—for the mysterious red signal, that is, though Gotschalk didn't know about that—the car door was opened and four men climbed in. One went to work gagging and taping the guard and baggagemen. The rest carried the four crates to the door and lowered them to the ground. Gotschalk could see what looked like a railroad repair truck waiting alongside. The paintings were put in the truck. The baggage car door was pushed shut from outside—and a second later the train started up again."

"And nobody learned about this until the train reached Beltsville at —" the rewrite man paused to consult his notes—"at 10:47?"

"Right," Ken said. "There was a road block around the area for fifteen minutes, but—Wait a minute."

He realized that Pop, on the phone again, was signaling to him.

"Road block's been called off," Pop reported. "The truck the paintings were in has been found, abandoned, and with the empty crates in it, on a back road halfway between here and Crandon." Pop turned back to his own phone. "Thanks, Andy. Anything else new?"

Ken waited until Pop shook his head, and then passed on the new information.

"Wow!" the rewrite man said softly. "Sure sounds like the movies I used to see as a kid! What else?"

"The rest," Ken told him firmly, "is an *Advance* exclusive, to be published with that understanding." He reached among the papers on his desk and pulled forward the account he had already written—a story that began with Joe's failure to turn up for work the previous Monday evening, and ended with the hospital's last bulletin.

"Wow!" the rewrite man repeated soberly at the end of it. "What a yarn!" But there was amusement in his voice when he added, "You and Sandy planning to capture these criminals too?"

Ken pretended he hadn't heard him. "I'll call back if there are any more developments," he said shortly, and hung up.

Lieutenant James was just swinging through the street door with a

big envelope in his hand. Without wasting any words he dumped a dozen photographs out of it and spread them on Sandy's vacant desk.

"Take a look, will you?" he asked. "These are rogues' gallery prints of men whose past records suggest they might have been mixed up in a job like this. Recognize any of 'em?"

Pop, Bert, and Ken studied the pictures at length. Their verdict was unanimous: none bore any notable resemblance to Tinker or to the four other men they had seen.

James sighed. "I didn't really expect anything else," he said, "but we have to try everything. We're having the nickname file checked now, for men who use the names Nick, Jack, Lefty, and Rudy. But they're all so common that I doubt if we'll get anything from that, either. And there's nothing on any Tinker that seems likely." He sighed again.

"Oh, yes—one other item." James straightened wearily. "I've had a radioed report from the men I sent out to Hangman's Inn. Sandy'll be along any time now," he added parenthetically to Pop. "And the only likely thing they turned up out there—those rough surfaces don't take fingerprints—were a couple of cigarette butts that Sandy claims are the same brand you boys found along the railroad track."

He glanced at his notes for the name, but Ken forestalled him. "Gibraltars! De Lacey again!"

"What's all this?" James' voice was sharp. "You didn't tell me anything about this."

"Sorry," Bert cut in. "That was my fault. Guess I forgot."

"I should have told you," Ken said. "I was so busy driving I didn't realize Bert hadn't mentioned them."

As rapidly as he could he told the policeman about the cigarettes and about their discovery that De Lacey smoked that brand. "Of course," he concluded, "he's prominent—a famous art critic, and even one of the Manhattan Museum trustees."

James was already reaching for the telephone. "I never heard of a museum trustee stealing paintings from his own institution," he said grimly, "but plenty of things happen every day that I haven't heard of before."

Within a matter of seconds he was issuing commands, asking Ken questions over his shoulder and passing on the information that De Lacey was staying with a Mrs. Temple in Crandon. "Report to me here the minute you've got anything," he concluded, giving the *Advance* phone number before he hung up,

"O.K. now." He swung around to face them. "While we wait, I'll bring you up to date on what we've discovered." He explained that the railroad maintenance truck which had been used in the holdup was clearly a junk-yard chassis, patched up and painted for the purpose to

which it had been put; that it carried stolen license plates; and that headquarters didn't expect quick results from any investigation in that direction.

When the phone rang he picked it up without even offering it to Pop first. His own end of the conversation was monosyllabic.

"Well, that's that." James got to his feet. "De Lacey left Crandon for New York this afternoon—which certainly looked suspicious. But he arrived in New York at nine o'clock, and took an eleven-thirty plane for Boston. He's sleeping in his room in a Boston hotel right now. Seems there's some kind of an art auction up there tomorrow." James grimaced. "So it looks like he personally had no hand in what happened tonight. He was in New York and on a plane while the whole thing was going on."

The officer sighed deeply as he stood up. "We're right back where we started from—and I've got a hunch we're going to be here quite awhile."

CHAPTER XIX

A TABLE IS SCRATCHED

Ken lifted his head from the pillow to look at the alarm clock on the table between his bed and Sandy's. Beyond it the redhead, one arm flung across his face to shut out the sun, stirred slightly and then was still again. The covers over his sprawled body rose and fell with the regularity of the sleeper's slow breathing.

Ken rubbed his eyes and lay back again, head turned toward the wall. It was almost nine o'clock. But he knew he'd slept scarcely three of the five hours that had elapsed since they'd gone to bed.

He shut his eyes and opened them again, turned over twice, and then gave it up. When he got out of bed he stood for a moment before the window overlooking the Allens' back yard, and then began to pace back and forth the length of the room, his bare feet making no sound on the carpeted floor.

When he finally looked at the clock again it said quarter past nine. Ken opened the door of the room and listened. The house was completely quiet. On the door across the hall Bert's Do not disturb sign hung prominently, its warning amplified by Bert's scrawled *Until Noon—and This Means You!*

Ken grinned. He and Sandy had come home about four, but Bert and Pop had stayed until the extra was run off. They deserved to sleep until noon, he thought.

And Mom, Ken knew, would have left for the hospital immediately after her own early breakfast.

Ken closed the door softly, but with sudden decision. A moment later he was getting into his clothes.

"What's up?" Sandy's sleepy whisper drifted across the room.

"Nothing. Just couldn't sleep. Maybe I'm hungry."

Sandy sat up, stretched, and yawned. "Stop kidding." His eyes were still closed, but his voice sounded wide awake. "Any time you can't sleep, something's wrong." With a single movement he tossed back the covers and pulled his pajama top over his head. "Go on down and start the percolator to perking," he added, standing upright.

Ten minutes later, when Sandy came downstairs, the kitchen was filled with the fragrant aroma of coffee, and Ken was putting bread into the toaster.

"I called the hospital," Ken said. "Joe's still under oxygen. And still unconscious."

"But no worse?"

"They said no worse."

Sandy picked up a glass of orange juice and drank it. As he carried the empty glass to the sink he added, "O.K. Give. What's eating you?"

Ken took the two slices of fresh toast as they popped up and began to butter them. "Questions—assorted questions. For example: How would you go about trying to get four famous paintings out of a road-blocked area?"

Sandy reached for the coffeepot. "They could have been out before the blocks were set up," he said finally.

The butter knife paused. "Possibly," Ken admitted. "But on the other hand that gang went to a lot of trouble to eliminate every foreseeable risk—look what they did to Joe and the rest of us, and all that work on the truck and the signal lights. They must have known there was a strong chance of the theft being discovered at Belville, and the cops going into action immediately." He shook his head. "Somehow I don't think they'd take a chance on a getaway that wasn't as foolproof as the rest of their scheme."

"It was foolproof, all right." Sandy sat down at the table. "I know! They took the pictures out of their frames and wrapped the canvasses around themselves, under their clothes. I'm sure I've read of smugglers —"

Ken was shaking his head again. "I don't think that sounds likely, either. They knew exactly which paintings were the most valuable of all the ones in the exhibit. They took just those paintings. Presumably they know where they can sell them—without having to answer too many questions. They're experts. So I don't think they'd take a chance on cracking the paint—which would be very likely to happen if they rolled them up like that."

"Guess you're right. They'd want to pack 'em very carefully—in wooden crates again, probably. But if you're just going to knock down every suggestion I put up, I don't—" Sandy broke off.

Ken had coughed suddenly and now he was turning red and choking. Sandy thrust a glass of water at him.

Ken waved it away. "Pack very carefully," he gasped. "Wooden crates. Where'd we hear that before?"

"Where did we—?"

Ken didn't let him finish. "In Mrs. Temple's barn! When Wilbur was packing De Lacey's antiques. De Lacey said he was the best packer he'd ever known. So why couldn't—?" He broke off to swallow some of the water.

"Hold it!" Sandy said. "Or have you forgotten the slight detail that De Lacey's in the clear? He was a long way from Crandon when the thing happened."

"Sure. *He* was. But were his crates?"

Sandy was already out of his chair. "We can find the answer to

that one,” he said, and made for the phone in the hall.

When he came back, three minutes later, his eye was bright. “Crates weren’t picked up until eight thirty this morning, Mrs. Temple says. Truck called for them then, just as De Lacey had told her it would. The truck driver and his assistant had to load them themselves—nobody from De Lacey’s staff was around. But that doesn’t say they weren’t around last night, shifting paintings out of their own crates into those big furniture boxes.”

Ken looked at him for a moment and then took a long thoughtful swallow of coffee.

“Well?” Sandy prodded him. “It was your idea! What’s the matter with it, now that it looks like it’s working out?”

“I don’t know,” Ken muttered. “De Lacey would have known the exhibit’s moving schedule all right—and which pictures to take—and which crates they’d be packed in. But it still doesn’t fit, somehow. De Lacey’s not ...”

Sandy too picked up his coffee cup and swallowed. When he put it down again he said in a more subdued voice, “Of course, I can’t quite see the police barging into his place—risking a suit for false arrest, or something, from a prominent citizen. Especially after they definitely cleared De Lacey last night.”

Sandy waited until Ken looked up and met his eye. “Unless,” Sandy said then, deliberately, and let the word hang suspended in the air.

After a long moment Ken repeated it. “Unless we had a little something more to give them,” he said finally. “Some further information about De Lacey and his business associates—such as we might pick up on a casual visit to the gallery. He did invite us to come in whenever we had a chance,” Ken added. “In fact”—Ken was suddenly on his feet—“as reporters it’s our job to get statements from prominent members of the museum’s board.”

Sandy grinned. “It certainly is! Should have thought of it sooner.”

Ken was looking at his watch. “If the truck left Crandon at eight thirty, it ought to reach New York about four hours later. We can do it faster—and it’s only ten now.”

“I’ll leave a note,” Sandy said, “while you bring the car around front.”

It was twelve thirty when they left the car in a parking lot just off Fifty-seventh Street in New York. Ten minutes later they were standing in front of the large window of the De Lacey Galleries. Behind the glass stood a simple, beautifully polished colonial sideboard, and above it, against heavy curtains, hung a single landscape in oils.

For a brief moment they hesitated, and then they walked firmly into the lobby adjoining the window. There were elevators for the

upper floors midway along the lobby, but the gallery door was immediately to the left. Beneath the shining metal plaque bearing the gallery name were two smaller signs. One announced that the De Lacey Galleries Workshop was located in the basement, and the other advised that all deliveries for the gallery be made through the basement.

Ken pushed open the gallery door and they stepped inside. Curtain-hung walls gave a curious deadness to the air, and there was no sound or movement to disturb the stillness. Ken and Sandy moved slowly forward.

The gallery itself was a huge room, but it was divided by partitions into smaller cubicles for the various displays. In each, arranged as they might have been in a luxurious house, were articles of antique furniture, lamps, clocks, and porcelain. The partition walls were hung with individually lighted paintings.

Side by side, their footsteps almost inaudible on the heavy carpet, Ken and Sandy walked down the wide center aisle between the alcovelike display rooms. They seemed to be the only ones in the gallery.

Sandy touched Ken's arm. "Listen," he said.

The muted sounds of a typewriter reached them from behind the gallery's rear wall. And then they heard voices from the same direction.

Quietly the boys moved toward the sounds. They stopped simultaneously when they both identified De Lacey's voice.

But in the next moment a door in the center of the rear wall opened and they found themselves faced by a stranger—a tall, slender man dressed in a conservative gray suit, with a black tie knotted boldly against a white shirt.

When he saw them his eyebrows lifted slightly. "Yes?" he said, smiling as he came toward them. "Did you just want to roam around, or is there anything I can do for you?"

"Mr. De Lacey asked us to drop in some time when we were in town," Ken told him. "Does he happen to be here now? We met him at Crandon the other day, at the Manhattan Museum exhibit," he added.

"I see. Just one moment." The man stepped back through the door. They could hear his low-voiced, "You have visitors, De Lacey. From Brentwood."

A chair was pushed back. "Visitors, Bonnell?" De Lacey's voice sounded thin and tired. "Today? I hardly think—"

De Lacey appeared in the doorway and broke off as he recognized the boys. "Oh—you two." He smiled briefly, and came toward them, hand outstretched. "I'm afraid you're striking me at a bad time—that dreadful business about the paintings! It—but of course! You two were

somehow caught up in it too, according to the papers. Are you all right? And do you know of any new developments?"

"We're fine," Ken told him. "No, we don't know of anything new. We hoped you'd give us a statement—as one of the museum's trustees. We understand the paintings were insured, but do you—?"

De Lacey was shaking his head. "Insured! Of course they are! But money can't replace art like that. The whole thing's fantastic—incredible! But a statement—no, really, I don't believe I can. I wouldn't want to speak for the museum. And as for myself—well, I'm simply too shocked to think. I dashed right back here from Boston, and I'm keeping in constant touch with the police, hoping—" Once more he broke off, and took the neatly folded handkerchief from his breast pocket to apply it to his forehead.

When he returned it to his pocket he said, "So I'm really afraid you'll have to excuse me. I must get back to the phone. Sorry, but I know you'll understand." He nodded quickly and turned away.

Ken looked after his retreating back. They couldn't force their way into the man's private office. "Do you mind if we look around for a few minutes, while we're here?" Ken asked, just before De Lacey disappeared. "We don't have another appointment right away."

De Lacey spoke from the doorway, after a moment's hesitation. "Of course not. Stay as long as you like. And one day when this has all quieted down, I'd like to show you some of my—But you do understand." And then he was through the door and closing it firmly.

Ken led the way toward the front end of the room. "Did you notice how Bonnell referred to us?" he murmured when they were a safe distance from the door.

Sandy nodded. "From Brentwood! And we hadn't said so."

Ken raised his voice. "Doesn't that look like the coast of Maine—that picture there?"

"Or Oregon, maybe." Sandy's tone was equally loud and clear. "And look at this one! The colors!"

For several minutes they dutifully toured the gallery, commenting audibly on paintings and articles of furniture. At the end of that time they were back again near the rear wall.

Suddenly the voices beyond it were faster, more intense.

Obeying an instinct rather than following any plan of action, Ken pulled Sandy inside the nearest small partitioned section and behind the shelter of a tall cupboard.

The door in the rear wall clicked open. "Not a word to anyone," they heard De Lacey say quietly. "We can't take a chance."

"I understand," Bonnell agreed.

Ken peered past the corner of the cupboard in time to see the two men hurry past. A moment later the outside door swung softly shut.

“Shall we follow—?” Sandy began in a whisper, but Ken motioned him to silence.

Bonnell’s voice called out: “Mr. Allen? Mr. Holt?” He was returning through the gallery, and in the instant before Ken pulled back behind the cupboard he saw Bonnell look worriedly around. “Mr. Allen? Mr. Holt?” he repeated.

He must have been standing directly in front of the small cubicle where they were concealed when he muttered, “Gone!”

Ken leaned forward again a moment later.

Bonnell was pulling a key ring out of his pocket. Carefully he selected a single key, bent over a delicately carved table, and drew the point of the key over its surface. Even from where he stood Ken could hear the scratching sound, and when Bonnell moved away, walking rapidly toward the rear of the gallery, Ken could see the long vivid scar in the satin-smooth finish.

When the door in the rear wall had closed on Bonnell, Ken swiftly told Sandy what he had seen.

“But what was the idea?” Sandy asked. “Didn’t he—?”

Ken motioned him to silence. Bonnell walked once more across his range of vision, followed this time by the figure of Wilbur, the packer whom they had met in Mrs. Temple’s barn.

“I don’t know how it happened, Wilbur,” Bonnell was saying. “I just noticed it. But it must be fixed immediately. Mrs. Westminster’s coming in to look at this piece today.”

“Appears real fresh to me,” Wilbur’s puzzled voice said. “Why don’t you keep the customers off the tables? You’d think people—” He sighed audibly. “Take me a good half hour to fix that—and the boss has already told me to unpack those crates that just come in.”

“Don’t worry about the crates,” Bonnell told him briskly. “I’ll take care of those. You just stay here with this until it’s finished.”

“All right—if you say so.”

Bonnell started back for the rear door. In the single instant that Ken could see him, the tall, slender man was pulling something out of his pocket. It was a small red box, lettered in gold. Ken couldn’t read the letters, but he didn’t have to. He knew they spelled out the word “GIBRALTAR”!

CHAPTER XX

RUN TO EARTH

The rear door clicked on Bonnell's retreating figure, and in the silence of the gallery Wilbur muttered to himself and bent over the scarred table.

Ken held himself rigid in their hiding place, but his mind was whirling.

It seemed clear that Wilbur had been decoyed out of the workroom at the very moment when he had intended to open the newly arrived crates. Bonnell was now opening those crates himself. And Bonnell smoked Gibraltar cigarettes.

Sandy stirred and touched Ken's arm, and then raised his eyebrows questioningly.

Sandy didn't know about the Gibaltars yet, but he knew enough to follow any lead Ken might give him. And there was no time to waste. If the stolen paintings were in the De Lacey workshop—and Ken felt certain now that they were—they might be there for only long enough to transfer them to still other containers and reload them for further shipment.

But Ken knew his conviction was not based on the kind of evidence the police were sure to accept. The fact that a man had scratched a table, deliberately—

No. They had to have more than that. And if they themselves attempted to invade the workroom, Bonnell—assuming he were guilty—would certainly see to it that they didn't leave until the paintings were safely away.

The rasp of fine sandpaper in Wilbur's careful hand sounded through the silent gallery.

And with sudden decision Ken stepped forth into the main room, pulling Sandy with him.

"Wilbur," Ken said quietly. "Remember us? We met you in Mrs. Temple's barn."

Wilbur looked up at them, studied their faces for an instant, and then smiled. "Sure. I was wrappin' a grandfather's clock." Suddenly he dropped his eyes to the table. "Sorry. Didn't know anybody was in here. I've been mutterin' kind of impolite words over this job—sort of words shouldn't be spoken in front of customers."

"We're not customers, Wilbur." Ken moved close to him. "You were right about that scratch being fresh. I saw Bonnell make it, on purpose, just before he called you up here."

Wilbur straightened, his eyes wide. "What are you—?"

Ken talked fast. "Those crates in the workroom—the ones that just arrived from Crandon—" In half a dozen brief sentences he had given Wilbur the reasons he believed they contained the stolen paintings.

Wilbur heard him out, and then he eyed Ken derisively. "You think we're crooks around here?" he demanded.

"Not you," Ken said quickly. "That's why—"

"De Lacey then?" Wilbur smiled scornfully. "Well, this is none of your business, but just to straighten you out I'll tell you I overheard De Lacey getting a phone call from the crooks only a few minutes ago tellin' him if he wants the paintings returned to the museum he should meet with them right off. That's where—"

Ken interrupted him. Everything had suddenly clicked in his mind. "No, not De Lacey," he said. "I see that now. Just Bonnell. He probably arranged a fake phone call to get De Lacey out of the way. And he got you out of the workroom to do this 'repair' job. Don't you see? Don't you remember De Lacey telling us, that day in Crandon, that Bonnell said you couldn't get rich taking so much trouble over things?"

Ken stopped then, and waited. He thought Wilbur would never answer. And the seconds were ticking by.

Wilbur looked down at the long, ugly scratch under his hand, and ran a finger along it.

"But we can't do anything until we know," Ken said finally, unable to wait any longer. "If you'd just go down to the workroom and take a look—it couldn't do any harm. And if—"

Wilbur straightened. "I could do that," he said then. "Mind you, I think this all sounds like a crazy—But I'll just go take a look. Need finer sandpaper, anyway," he added, a sudden angry gleam in his eye.

Sandy stopped Wilbur as he moved away. "Just a second. How many entrances to the shop downstairs?"

"One through the office back there." Wilbur nodded toward the rear. "And one by way of the stairs goin' down from the lobby—through the fire door at the back. That's where we make deliveries."

"O.K. We'll wait out in the lobby then, so we can keep an eye on that one."

Wilbur nodded briefly. A moment later he had disappeared through the door at the rear.

"I sure hope you know what you're doing," Sandy muttered, as he and Ken crossed the gallery and let themselves out into the lobby. "For a while in there I thought you were making things up, but—"

"I wasn't making anything up," Ken said grimly.

They turned toward the rear of the lobby—and stopped dead. Through the door marked fire exit the unmistakable figure of Rudy was just vanishing, a large crate balanced on his shoulder.

When the heavy door had swung to behind him the boys looked at each other for a split second. There was no need for words: they had just witnessed positive proof of a tie-up between the gang of Hangman's Inn and the De Lacey Galleries Workshop.

Ken swung on his heel. "I'll get the police," he said. "You—" The next word stuck in his throat.

Coming through the outer door, from the street, was Tinker, also carrying a large wooden box.

The walls of the small lobby seemed to close in on them. None of the three elevator doors stood open. The entrance to the gallery itself was so close to the outer door that they could never reach it before Tinker saw them. And except for Tinker's approaching figure, the lobby was deserted. The elevator starter was out on the sidewalk, helping Tinker to manipulate the box through the swinging plate-glass door.

Simultaneously Ken and Sandy ran for the fire door and pushed it open. It gave onto a small concrete landing from which stairs ran down—presumably to the workshop—and up to the other floors of the building.

In three bounds the boys ascended the first flight of stairs going up. There they stopped, huddled out of sight where the stairs turned back on themselves, as the door ten feet below them swished open.

"Thanks, Mac. I can take it now," Tinker's voice said, and the door swished shut again.

They heard his slow descending footsteps, and then quicker steps on concrete. Tinker was apparently walking along a corridor at the foot of the stairs.

When the sound had finally faded away they waited for the space of a single long breath.

"Now!" Sandy whispered then.

Cautiously they tiptoed down the single flight to the street level. Ken had his hand on the fire door, to ease it open, when they heard the angry voices. They echoed hollowly against concrete walls, but the words were clear enough.

"Thought you said Wilbur'd be out of the way!"

"I did! I'd arranged it. But the crazy fool came snooping down here." It was the voice of Bonnell, but it was also the deadly voice of the invisible figure who had issued orders at Hangman's Inn. "So we'll have to take care of him for a while, until—"

"You cheap crook!" Wilbur's angry shout drowned him out. "Why, I—!"

There was a sudden silence.

"Nice work, Tinker," Bonnell commented then. "Just put him over there—out of the way. All right now—two paintings in each box. The

one you were carrying. Tinker, is for the Holbein and the Van Gogh.”

Ken pulled himself together. They were wasting time—and he felt sure there was little time to waste. He glanced at Sandy. The redhead’s jaw was tight. Ken knew how he felt. Bonnell’s calm ruthlessness had filled him too with a cold rage.

But when Ken nodded his head toward the lobby, to indicate that he would go for the police, as they had originally planned, Sandy nodded back.

Ken eased the fire door open quietly and then let it swing shut again just as quietly.

Nick’s tall figure lounged in the outer doorway.

Sandy had seen him too. For a long moment they looked at each other. It was too late for anything but direct action.

It was Ken who led the way downstairs. At the foot of the flight they paused momentarily. Ahead of them a narrow corridor ran some twenty feet toward the front of the building, ending there at a partition. Just before the partition, on the right, a doorway stood open. Light from beyond the doorway partially illuminated the corridor.

Cautiously, pressed close to the wall, they moved toward the opening.

“Come on,” Bonnell’s impatient voice snapped, and a hammer struck briskly against wood.

When they reached the doorway, Ken risked a quick look around, his eye just barely clearing the framework.

The workshop was a big room, filled with the untidy clutter and the usual equipment of a cabinetmaker’s shop. A broad bench at one end was littered with tools. Shelves held cans of paint and varnish. Lumber lay racked against one wall.

In the center of the shavings-scattered floor, Rudy and Tinker were sliding a framed painting out of one crate and into another. Beyond them, near the bench, Bonnell stood. He was watching the men’s work, frowning slightly at their clumsiness. But there was a gun in his hand and he frequently glanced down at Wilbur’s prone figure near his feet.

Sandy nudged Ken and pointed toward the workshop. His questioning eyes asked if they should rush in.

Ken shook his head. He made a pistol out of his hand. Sandy nodded. Three men and a gun was more opposition than they could handle.

Ken glanced through the doorway again. And then he dropped to his knees. Just inside the door, on the top of a pile of sweepings, was a length of rope. Ken inched his arm around the doorframe, exploring with his fingers until they closed on the rope. Cautiously he drew it

back into the hall.

He straightened up and gave one end of it to Sandy. Then he glanced quickly into the room to make certain no one was facing the doorway, and ran crouching the few steps to the far side of the opening.

He stood perfectly still for a moment there, to assure himself his movements hadn't been heard. When he turned to face Sandy, the redhead winked. Already Sandy was kneeling down, holding his end of the rope a foot or so off the floor. Ken winked back, and pulled the rope taut.

It was an old ruse. They would trip the room's occupants as they rushed out. But it had to be dark. And if the men weren't hurrying, the trick wouldn't work. Sandy's eyebrows asked how these details were to be managed.

Before Ken could signal to him, they heard the fire door open and close, with a hiss of air from the door check.

"Hey—down there!" Nick's voice carried clearly. "I can't stay double-parked out here all day."

"Come on down," Rudy called back. "We've got another little—eh—package for you to take care of."

Nick's footsteps clattered down the stairs.

Ken flashed Sandy a wink in the same instant that he straightened up. Standing full in the center of the doorway he shouted: "Hey! Police!"

And then he flashed his arm through the opening, snapped off the overhead light at the switch he had seen there, and returned immediately to his crouched position, pulling the rope taut.

"Nick! Get 'em! Those crazy kids again!" Tinker's was the first distinguishable voice in the burst of confused noise.

The footsteps on the stairs began to pound, and there was a scramble of footsteps in the workroom. From both directions they came closer through the darkness.

Suddenly the rope was almost yanked from the boys' grasp, as two hurtling figures from the workroom struck against it. A single loud yell was cut off short as the second figure landed heavily on the first one.

Nick came to an uncertain halt at the end of the corridor, a perfect target against the light behind him.

There was some fifteen feet between him and Sandy. The redhead covered the distance in two leaps and a headlong dive that he had learned on the football field. His shoulder caught Nick in the stomach, drove him back three feet against the wall, and knocked the air out of him in a single gust.

Sandy scrambled to his feet, took quick aim, and let go with a

haymaker to the chin that completed the job.

Then he ran back, fumbled along the inside wall of the workroom until he found the switch, and clicked it on. The light flooded out onto the writhing scramble of arms and legs in the corridor. Ken was on top of it, holding the prone Tinker's arm in a secure hammer lock. But Rudy, already struggling to his knees, was trying to reach Ken's throat with clawing fingers.

Sandy reached his right arm around the pudgy neck and pulled on his right wrist with his left hand. Then he lifted the wildly writhing figure a foot off the floor and dropped him. Before Rudy could recover balance, Sandy had caught one of the flailing arms in a firm grip. Then, suddenly remembering Bonnell, he swung Rudy around to act as a shield between himself and Ken and the man who had a gun.

But Bonnell no longer had his gun. In the darkness and the confusion Wilbur had dealt with Bonnell in his own way. With one foot firmly planted on the weapon, Wilbur was now holding the front of Bonnell's neat gray suit in one hand. The other hand flashed across Bonnell's face as Ken and Sandy watched.

"Ruin a Sheraton table, will you!" The flat of Wilbur's hand struck again. "Hit me on the head, will you!" He struck a third time. "Use our gallery for your dirty business—will you!"

Ken was grinning a little shakily when he yelled out, "Hey, Wilbur! Take it easy! It's all over."

And it was all over.

There was no fight left in any of the four men. In a few minutes all of them—including the groggy Nick—were securely bound, hand and foot, and Ken was telephoning the police while Wilbur and Sandy stood guard.

Bonnell wouldn't talk when the police came. But he didn't have to. Only a few hours before he had been sharply reminding the others that he was the boss, but now they were only too anxious to prove that fact. They outdid each other in loud accusations, assuring the police that Bonnell alone had instigated and planned the whole elaborate operation.

De Lacey came in in the midst of it, still confused and angry over the fruitless trip he had made in response to the mysterious phone call. And at first he couldn't seem to understand why his workshop was so crowded—why Bonnell and three other men, all strangers to him, were handcuffed to blue-coated officers.

Wilbur took his employer gently by the arm. "Look, Mr. De Lacey," he said, "the paintings are safe. And it's going to be all right. Don't worry about anything else."

The Rembrandt, the Holbein, the Van Gogh, and the Picasso were left in De Lacey's office under guard when the grim police—escorted

procession finally took off. Ken, Sandy, and De Lacey had all promised to follow it shortly, to give their formal statements to the authorities. But De Lacey had received permission to inform the museum authorities first, and Ken and Sandy wanted to report the story to Pop and to Global News.

De Lacey said that he too wanted to listen to every word of it—that then perhaps he would really understand what had been happening. But he became so engrossed in a careful examination of the pictures, exploring their surfaces for any possible injury, that he seemed scarcely aware of what Ken was saying over the wire.

It wasn't a very long story Ken had to tell. They had known so much of it before this final explosive morning.

"... And Bonnell knew that De Lacey had a buying trip planned for just the right time to provide him with those crates in Crandon—and he knew that De Lacey was going to Boston last night," Ken was saying shortly. "Everything went pretty smoothly for him right up to the last minute ... Yes, Lefty and Jack are still at large, but with the rest talking their heads off, it won't be long. Now I want to tell you about Wilbur. He ..."

De Lacey finally looked away from the paintings just as Pop's voice boomed into the room. "Good for Wilbur!" Pop was shouting. "Wish I'd seen it! Tell Sandy not to forget a picture of him."

"He's got one," Ken assured him. "And a lot of other stuff. We'll go over to Global so that he can develop them there, as soon as we—"

"May I speak to Mr. Allen?" De Lacey was murmuring.

"Sure." Slightly surprised, Ken handed him the phone.

"Mr. Allen," De Lacey said earnestly into the mouthpiece, "I owe Ken and your son an enormous debt of gratitude. The whole world of art, in fact—"

Pop's embarrassed boom cut him off. Ken grinned. He himself had long been accustomed to the Allens' inability to accept thanks. A moment later De Lacey handed the phone back.

"Well, that's about it from this end," Ken wound it up. "Except for one thing: wasn't Mom expected back from the hospital about now with news of—... He is?" Ken's face widened in a grin and his eyes lit up. "That's great, Pop! Give him our best. And tell Joe"—Ken turned his grin on De Lacey—"that the whole world of art owes him an enormous debt of gratitude."

When they had shaken hands with De Lacey, and promised to have dinner with him that evening, they started for the gallery door on their way to the street.

The sergeant assigned to the paintings stopped them. "Pack of reporters out there," he said confidentially. "All waiting around to get stories from you two—and your pictures and all. Thought maybe

you'd rather skip it right now. There's a back way out, down through
—"

"We know. Thanks." Ken saluted him, and together he and Sandy made their way down the stairs to the basement and along the corridor where they had been so frantically busy only a little while before.

"Handy to have a quick rear exit," Sandy said, slinging his camera case into a more comfortable position.

"It sure is."

Their eyes met and they grinned. Their footsteps along the concrete floor were brisk and lighthearted.

It was just as well that they couldn't know, in that moment, that there would be no easy exit from the trouble they would find themselves in when, very soon, they probed *The Mystery of the Iron Box*.

THE END

THE SECRET OF HANGMAN'S INN

A KEN HOLT Mystery, no. 6

By Bruce Campbell